

# To kneel

before God and for country

by Molly Klimas | photos courtesy Jim McCormick, Bob and Marsha Stadel



>> Members of the Knights of Columbus No. 14404 in Lake Odessa who helped build kneelers for McCormick and fellow Catholics serving in Iraq; (from left) Mary James, Jim's stepdad Bob Stadel, Chuck Helsper, Pat James, Dick Peacock, Terry Kelly and Roger Manschum.



>> The 45 kneelers that Knights of Columbus in Lake Odessa built for soldiers in Iraq.



>> Member of the Knights of Columbus in Lake Odessa in the shop of Bob Stadel, McCormick's stepfather, work together to build kneelers for soldiers in Iraq.



>> McCormick (kneeling in center) shown with fellow Catholics, holding kneelers made by the Knights of Columbus in Lake Odessa, serving at Joint Base Balad, one of the largest American military bases in Iraq.

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h, the little-noticed knee, taken for granted until injury or arthritis or age calls attention to the joint that joins the thigh and lower leg.

Kneeling is nothing for some; for others, it is a literal physical struggle for others.

In ancient times, the Greeks and Romans rejected kneeling, considering it an act of submission and weakness. Some philosophers said kneeling expressed superstition. Aristotle called it barbaric.

According to the writings of Pope Benedict XVI, the Hebrews “regarded the knees as a symbol of strength, to bend the knee is, therefore, to bend our

strength before the living God, an acknowledgment of the fact that all that we are we receive from Him. ... Saint Augustine said that the humility of Christ and His love ... freed us ... We now kneel before that humility. ... ”

For many of us, although kneeling is meaningful, it’s in the background: a matter of up-down-up-down at Mass; a ritual for morning or bedtime prayer. We barely give it a thought.

For Jim McCormick, and thousands of military men and women like him serving overseas, the act of kneeling is poignant; the freedom to adore God as a Catholic, or of any faith, is priceless.



>> McCormick stands in front of one of his unit’s Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles.



>> McCormick’s unit attends Mass at a chapel surrounded by concrete blast barriers called T-Walls, which help to protect occupants from incoming mortars.



» McCormick shown a few years ago while serving in the Army Ski Patrol in the Italian Alps.

**I**n July, McCormick, 45, began a tour of duty in Iraq at Joint Base Balad, headquarters of the 332nd Air Expeditionary Wing. A 25-year serviceman and pilot for the U.S. Army, Jim transports passengers into, out of and around Iraq.

Joint Base Balad is one of the largest American military bases in Iraq and the busiest military air base in the world. About 40 miles north of Baghdad in the Sunni Triangle region – Saddam Hussein’s former “power base” – it’s sometimes still called by its former name, Camp Anaconda.

The base is huge and divided into sections – almost like villages within a city. The region is desert: flat and hot. Most summer days, the temperature reaches 125 degrees. Dust storms – called shamals – are frequent, reducing visibility to less than a mile. The choking dust gets into everything. It’s about as different from Michigan as you can get.

The Grand Rapids-born McCormick attends Sunday Mass along with about 40 other Catholics in his area at Balad. Church is a metal building with no windows. Windows are not a good idea here,” McCormick said in an e-mail interview with *FAITH Grand Rapids*.

The building is surrounded by concrete blast barriers called T-Walls, which help to protect occupants from incoming mortar rounds. Recently during Mass, an explosion occurred close enough that it shook the building.

“Father Paul (Amaliri, a U.S. Air Force chaplain) was consecrating the host when the explosion occurred. He paused briefly to steady the chalice, just for a second, and then continued. What else was there to do?” McCormick said.

The building’s floor is concrete – not exactly comfortable for kneeling.

A couple of months ago, McCormick called his mother and stepfather, Marsha and Bob Stadel, of Lake Odessa, asking them if they would find out if the Angelus or similar

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Catholic stores sold kneelers.

As McCormick and his mom continued to talk on the phone, a thought began to form in Bob Stadel’s mind. A skilled craftsman, he started sketching some ideas to build kneelers from scratch.

“I couldn’t sleep that night – I had to figure out the design,” Stadel said.

The next morning, a Friday, the design was finished. That day, the Stadels bought materials – thick foam padding, heavy-duty

fabric and wood – to make 45 kneelers. Bob Stadel, along with the Knights of Columbus of St. Edward Parish in Lake Odessa, gathered in his workshop, sawing and sanding and assembling all day Saturday.

The finished kneelers are five inches high and 16 inches long – they look kind of like shoeboxes and stack really well, Bob Stadel said. The foam padding adds a measure of comfort.

Each worker put a little sticky note – a word of thanks, prayer or encouragement – on the bottom of each kneeler. By Sunday afternoon, the project was done and, that Monday,

### Kneeling is biblical

The word *proskynein* appears 59 times in the New Testament (*proskynesis*, formed from the ancient Greek words *pros* and *kunyo* literally means “kissing towards”) and refers to the traditional Persian act of prostrating oneself before a person of a higher social rank.

Source: Wikipedia.org



## Why we kneel

According to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops:

The posture of kneeling signified penance in the early church: the awareness of sin casts us to the ground! So thoroughly was kneeling identified with penance that the early Christians were forbidden to kneel on Sundays and during the Easter season when the prevailing spirit of the liturgy was that of joy and thanksgiving. In the Middle Ages, kneeling came to signify the homage of a vassal to his lord, and more recently this posture has come to signify adoration. It is for this reason that the bishops of this country have chosen the posture of kneeling for the entire Eucharistic Prayer.

[www.usccb.org/liturgy/girm/bul3.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/liturgy/girm/bul3.shtml)

they shipped the kneelers.

They arrived at Balad the following Sunday morning – just as McCormick and fellow Catholics were preparing for Mass.

“We unpacked them five minutes before Mass began. We all sat there reading handwritten notes pasted to the bottom of the kneelers by folks from St. Edward Parish. We were stunned – really shocked – and deeply grateful,” McCormick said. “It may seem like a small thing, but not so when you’re here in Iraq, kneeling on hard concrete. We were truly touched by the generosity; how folks gave their time, talent and resources to help service members they don’t even know who are half-way ‘round the world. We could not have asked for a better gift!”



>> Jim in his early teens.

## Gift of faith

Living in Iraq has helped McCormick to appreciate each day as a gift.

“There are a lot of people here who would like to do us harm. They shoot at our aircraft and launch mortars at us. There are things we do to protect ourselves, but the rest is in God’s hands,” he said.

Marsha Stadel said her son’s strength sprang from a deep well of faith formed years ago.

“The growing-up years were hard for Jim,” she said. “His father and I divorced when he was 13. Jim doesn’t talk much about it, but I know it was difficult. He leaned heavily on his faith.”

The middle child of three siblings, Jim joined the Army in order to get money for college. He did not plan on making it a career.

“I was worried at first – no one in my family had been in the military,” Marsha Stadel said. “But, I felt God was guiding him.”

McCormick began his military career as a paratrooper – jumping out of airplanes. He took college classes at night and on weekends, eventually attaining a bachelor’s degree. He then applied for and was accepted into the Army’s flight training school. One year later, he graduated and was flying attack helicopters for the Army. Loving flying, he became a fixed-wing pilot and has flown a variety of airplanes. Today, he flies both the Citation Jet and Beech King Air.

“He jokingly calls himself a taxi driver,” his mom said.

But McCormick takes service to his

“ There is an old saying: There is no such thing as an atheist in a foxhole. ... War brings many things into sharp focus, and it has caused me to reevaluate what’s important: God, my family and the soldiers I work with and depend on.”

country very seriously and considers it not only his duty, but also his honor. Twelve of his 25 years in the military have been spent overseas. He has patrolled the 38th parallel – the demilitarized zone that separates North Korea and South Korea. He has been stationed in Italy. Now, he is based in Germany and will return after his tour in Iraq is over.

His wife, Kari, has been alongside him these 25 years, except for when he is deployed. “I married my high school sweetheart,” McCormick said. “Being the wife of a soldier carries a special burden. We’ve moved 12 times in 25 years, so often that Kari must feel like she’s in the circus! She just rolls up her sleeves and packs the boxes (again).”

Together, they have three children: son Chris, 22, in college in New Mexico; daughter Katy, 20, in college in New York; and son Nick, 18, a senior in high school in Germany.

“Our kids have benefited from living overseas. It’s been a tremendous



>> A family visit to John Ball Park Zoo in Grand Rapids; (from left) McCormick’s younger brother John, his mother Marsha, Jim and his sister Maureen.

>> McCormick's family, (from left, front row) Jim, his wife Kari, daughter Katy, (from left, back row) Nick and Chris.



education. Our two oldest were able to attend World Youth Day with Pope Benedict in Germany. We were able to make a family visit to Rome and the Vatican. That was awesome!" McCormick said.

But the family also misses being close to extended family and friends in the United States.

"Because our kids have moved so often, Lake Odessa is the place that they identify as 'home.' They always look forward to working in Grandpa Bob's wood workshop and summer camp at Camp Manitou-lin (a YMCA camp near Wayland)."

### Spiritual connection

Through Mass, McCormick said he feels spiritually connected to his wife, children and parents even though he is thousands of miles from them. "Mass is something we've always done together as a family, so even when I'm not with them, I'm thinking of them," he said.

The spirituality and faith of McCormick and his fellow Catholics

at the base sometimes garner snickers among non-believers. One time, the chaplain, Father Paul, was asked by an Air Force security policeman to bless a new MRAP – Mine-Resistant Armored Vehicle.

"The security policeman's (MP) buddies made light humor of the blessing, acting like the Holy Water was burning their skin like the (witch in the) Wizard of Oz," McCormick recalled.

A few days later, these same personnel were hit by a roadside bomb while on patrol in the very same vehicle. The vehicle was badly damaged, but remarkably – some might say miraculously – all made it out, unscathed.

"They were all shaken, to say the least," McCormick said. "There is an old saying: There is no such thing as an atheist in a foxhole. ... War brings many things into sharp focus, and it has caused me to reevaluate what's important: God, my family and the soldiers I work with and depend on." ☩

### To kneel

Every now and then, there's talk of doing away with kneeling in the Catholic Mass. Some feel we should "stand up for our faith" – which, of course, we should.

But kneeling brings its special blessings.

FAITH GR asked Jim about this. He said, "I believe the ritual is important. It demonstrates our willingness to submit to God's will. In a military environment, it also demonstrates that we are all equal before God – regardless of our military rank. ... And, having the ability to kneel at Mass (comfortably) makes things here seem somewhat normal, if only for an hour at Mass or a few moments in the small converted closet that serves as the Blessed Sacrament chapel. Everyone here goes to Mass in a military uniform and with a weapon – an M-16 – so we long for things that are normal. It is amazing how many people take the kneelers rather than just standing or sitting."