

BY TERRY O'BRIEN

How was I going to kneel and pray in a noisy, crowded barracks?

I had just returned from serving a Guatemalan mission and was still weak from a long bout with amoebas when I was drafted into the United States Army. One concern caused me to seek counsel from my bishop. In the mission field I had become accustomed to kneeling each night in prayer with my missionary companion. My question to the bishop was: "How am I going to kneel and pray in a noisy, crowded barracks?"

"You'll find a way," the bishop assured me.

A few weeks later, I was on a train with other men headed for an uncertain life at Fort Ord, California. The bishop's reassurance that I would "find a way" still left me uncertain.

Taunted in the Barracks

The first few days were overwhelming and unsettling—sheared hair, oversized clothes, and leaders shouting demeaning words at me. Worse yet, my fellow soldiers were loud, foul-mouthed, and worldly—very different from my companions in the mission field. I kept wondering, "Why me? Why now?"

The bishop had given me a small serviceman's edition of the Book of Mormon, and in my free time, I retreated to my corner bunk and immersed myself in the scriptures. Somehow it helped smooth the transition from missionary to military.

Then came Bill (name changed), a recruit who noticed my isolation and who began to taunt me.

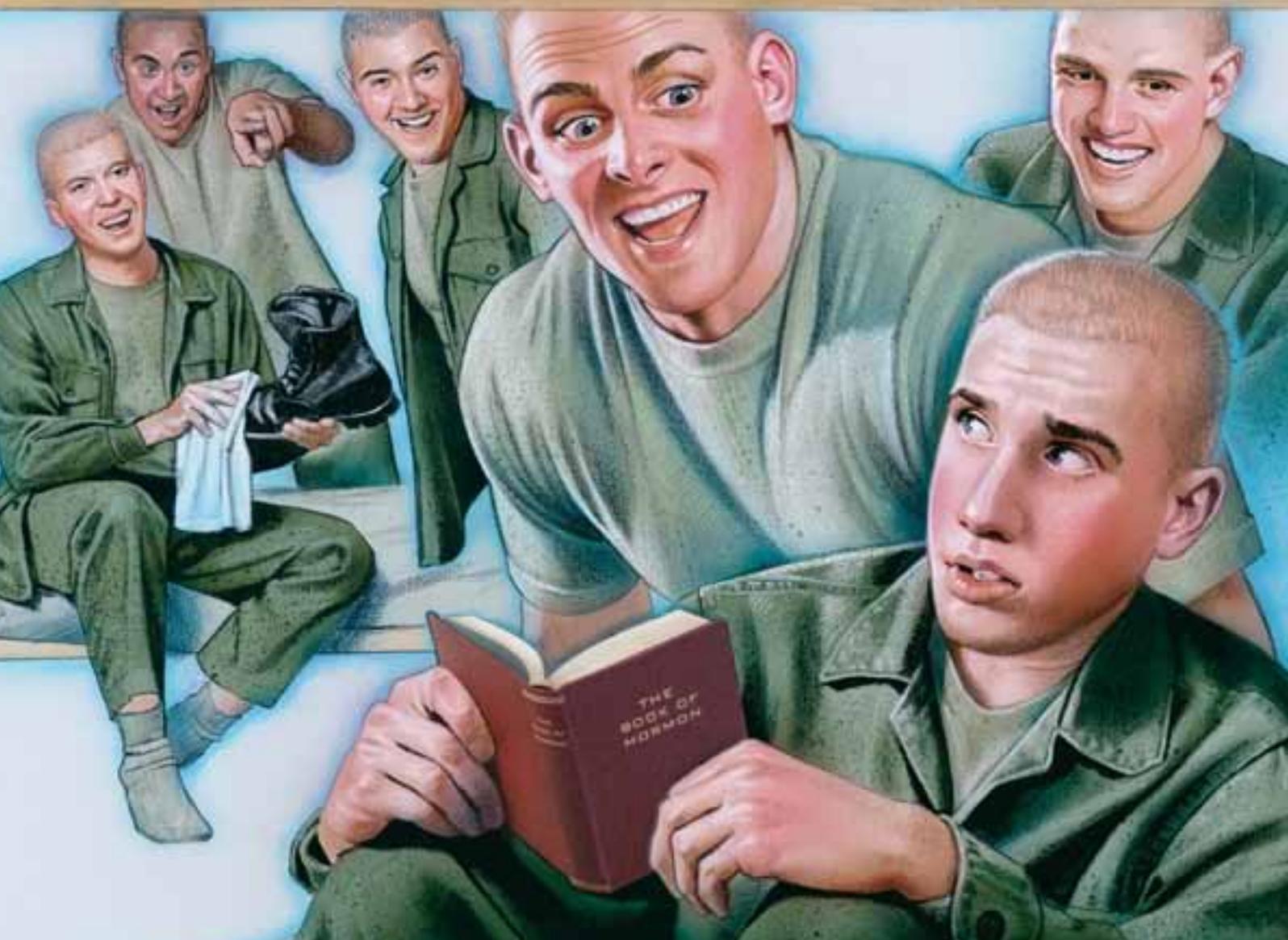
"Hey, O'Brien," he said, "what's that you're reading?"

"A book you probably wouldn't know anything about."

"Oh, the Book of Mormon. I've heard of it. Have you seen old Moroni lately?"

ILLUSTRATED BY ROGER MOTZKUS

YOU'LL FIND A WAY





“No,” I grimaced, “as a matter of fact, I haven’t.”

“Well, I’d sure like to meet the guy. Maybe he could show me the gold plates.”

I edged farther back into my bunk while the other men gathered around and laughed boisterously.

For days, Bill continued to harass me. Like the rest of us, he had been jerked out of his familiar and safe surroundings, and he tried to establish himself using tough language, jokes, and roughhousing. He had a muscular build from wrestling in college, and the men looked up to him. Apparently, it bothered him that I was so weak and thin.

My only solace would come at night when lights were out, the men were asleep, and all was quiet. I would slip out of my lower bunk, kneel, and talk to Heavenly Father. I asked for strength to endure. Then I would slip back into my bunk with a strong feeling that Heavenly Father would help me. After all, it would be only a short time until everyone would be reassigned to different companies.

Bill’s harassment increased. I met his remarks with calm reserve and an attempt at friendliness. At last the anticipated day for reassignment came. Bill and I were assigned not only to the same battalion, company, and platoon but also to the same barracks.

My heart sank. I picked up my gear and hurried over to the barracks. The room was long, and I pictured Bill’s bunk at one end and mine at the other. He would have new men to harass. There was still some hope. Soon the other men arrived, and I heard a familiar voice, “Hey, buddy. Why don’t we share the same bunk?”

I couldn’t believe it—it was Bill. Unable to come up with an excuse, I grudgingly consented. Then he said, “Let’s flip for the bottom bunk.” With self-assurance that I would get the lower bunk so I could kneel and pray at night, I flipped the coin. It spun in the air, seemed to pause for a moment, and then landed—in favor of Bill.

Finding a Way

I was downcast. The next day one thought dominated my mind—hadn’t the bishop promised I would find a way? How was I going to kneel to pray on a top bunk?

That night, just before lights out, I hesitatingly approached Bill with a request: “I’m used to kneeling at night to pray

before I go to bed. Would you mind if I use the foot of your bunk?” I braced myself for the laughter I was sure would follow. Instead, he casually agreed, “No problem,” and went on shining his boots.

I waited until lights were out and the men had settled down. Then I slipped out of my top bunk to the foot of Bill’s bunk. Feeling somewhat nervous, I said a short prayer. I thanked Heavenly Father for helping me thus far and requested further help to deal with Bill and whatever was coming.

I climbed back up onto my bed and lay there wondering how the next eight weeks would go. Then I felt the bunk shake heavily. I thought Bill must be getting up for a drink of water. I looked down, and there at the side of the bed was Bill, kneeling. Confused, I could scarcely believe it and lay back saying nothing.

The next day was a rigorous one of long marches in a hot sun. During the lunch break as I sat alone under a tree, Bill came over and sat down next to me. We chatted for a few minutes, and then he suddenly turned serious, something I had never seen in him before. He admitted that the previous night when he saw me kneeling at the foot of his bunk, he had thought about how difficult he had made life for me.

“Guess I’ve really been a problem,” he grinned.

“You got that right,” I smiled back.

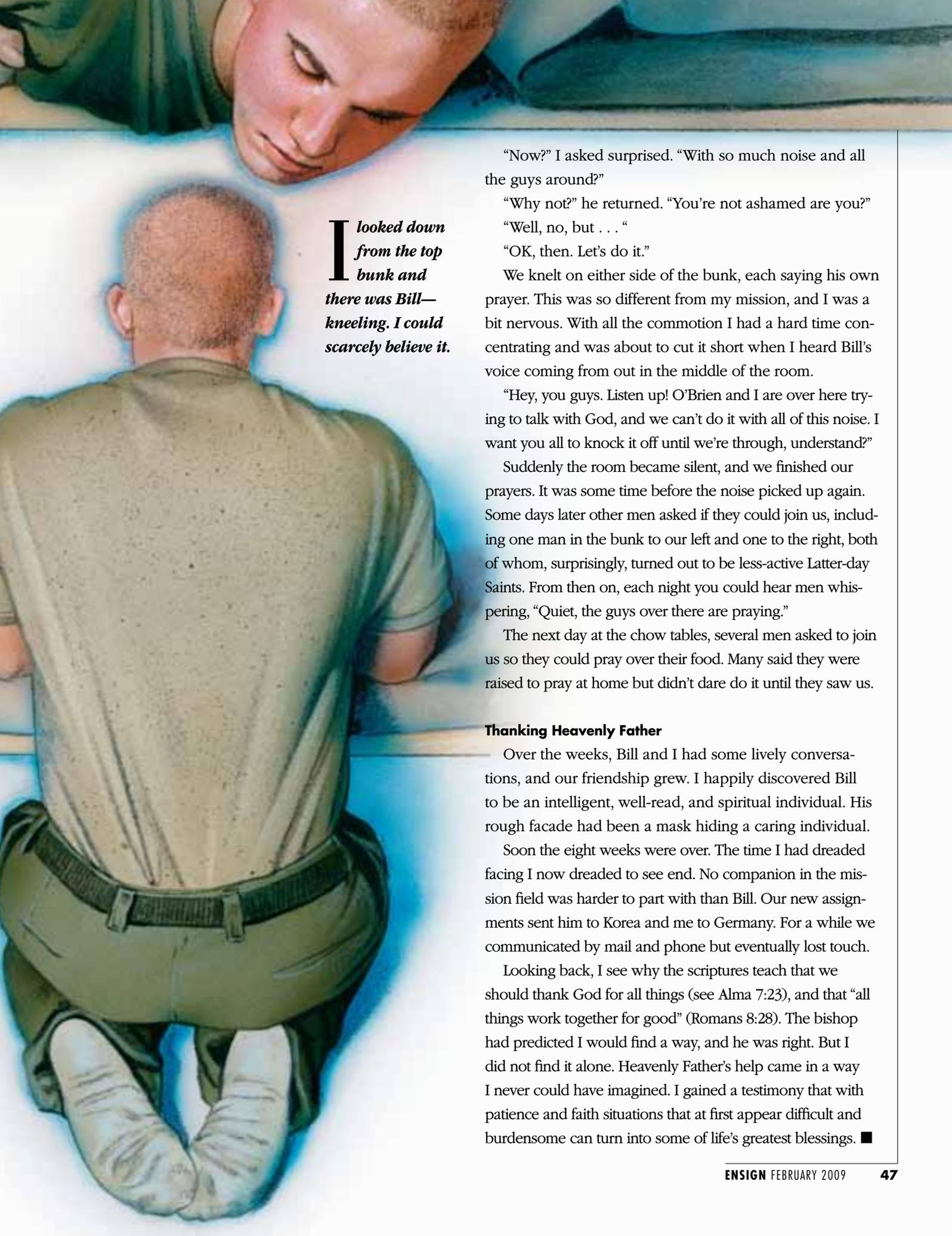
He further said he realized he could spend the next eight weeks acting tough like the guys around us, or he could change his direction and be more refined. He said he had decided to be more like me and would like to learn to pray. “I tried it last night,” he admitted, “but didn’t quite know how. Maybe you could teach me.”

I was completely stunned but gladly consented. Then, while we were running back into formation, he said, “Hey, how about we pray together?” How ironic! I had seen myself as the “righteous” returned missionary, and here was my tormentor asking me to pray with him.

Kneeling for Prayer

That night as the men were running around laughing and joking, Bill told me that he was tired and wanted to go to bed early. I said goodnight and went on shining my boots.

“Well,” he remarked, “have you forgotten that we were going to pray?”



I looked down from the top bunk and there was Bill—kneeling. I could scarcely believe it.

“Now?” I asked surprised. “With so much noise and all the guys around?”

“Why not?” he returned. “You’re not ashamed are you?”

“Well, no, but . . .”

“OK, then. Let’s do it.”

We knelt on either side of the bunk, each saying his own prayer. This was so different from my mission, and I was a bit nervous. With all the commotion I had a hard time concentrating and was about to cut it short when I heard Bill’s voice coming from out in the middle of the room.

“Hey, you guys. Listen up! O’Brien and I are over here trying to talk with God, and we can’t do it with all of this noise. I want you all to knock it off until we’re through, understand?”

Suddenly the room became silent, and we finished our prayers. It was some time before the noise picked up again. Some days later other men asked if they could join us, including one man in the bunk to our left and one to the right, both of whom, surprisingly, turned out to be less-active Latter-day Saints. From then on, each night you could hear men whispering, “Quiet, the guys over there are praying.”

The next day at the chow tables, several men asked to join us so they could pray over their food. Many said they were raised to pray at home but didn’t dare do it until they saw us.

Thanking Heavenly Father

Over the weeks, Bill and I had some lively conversations, and our friendship grew. I happily discovered Bill to be an intelligent, well-read, and spiritual individual. His rough facade had been a mask hiding a caring individual.

Soon the eight weeks were over. The time I had dreaded facing I now dreaded to see end. No companion in the mission field was harder to part with than Bill. Our new assignments sent him to Korea and me to Germany. For a while we communicated by mail and phone but eventually lost touch.

Looking back, I see why the scriptures teach that we should thank God for all things (see Alma 7:23), and that “all things work together for good” (Romans 8:28). The bishop had predicted I would find a way, and he was right. But I did not find it alone. Heavenly Father’s help came in a way I never could have imagined. I gained a testimony that with patience and faith situations that at first appear difficult and burdensome can turn into some of life’s greatest blessings. ■