

Military chaplains: A historian's view from the American Revolution to Iraq

An interview with the US Army Chaplain Corps historian, John Brinsfield

OCTOBER 30, 2007

The US Army chaplaincy was born of a combination of desire and need: As he battled the British, Gen. George Washington desperately wanted Providence on his side but, to ensure this, his troops needed to be above reproach – and one way to ensure this was to have chaplains on board.

Through US history, military chaplains have had significant, sometimes controversial, roles in peace and war. Retired Col. John W. Brinsfield, US Army Chaplain Corps historian, has documented the evolution of the Army chaplaincy in several volumes. An ordained United Methodist minister Dr. Brinsfield teaches 400 chaplains a year at the US Army Chaplain Center and School and answers historical questions from the public at www.usachcs.army.mil.

Lee Lawrence interviewed him in connection with a documentary film project on chaplains, and a related series of profiles for the Monitor. Excerpts of the interview follow.

On the mission of chaplains:

There are a couple of verses chaplains use when they go out. One is from the first chapter of Joshua: 'Be strong and be of good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed, for the Lord thy God is with thee wheresover thou goest.'

The other is from Romans ... where St. Paul says, 'I am convinced that neither height nor depth, nor death, nor life, nor angels nor principalities, nor anything in heaven or earth can separate us from the love of God.'

This is an incredible experiment that's been going on since George Washington's day. Washington's view [was] that the only victorious army [WAS] going to be, at least, an ethical army if not a religious army ... Washington thought the only way he could win was with a righteous army, because the odds were so overwhelming against him.

On chaplains' duties:

Washington wanted [chaplains] to be religious leaders.... But the chaplains were also to visit the wounded, take care of the dead, write letters home for soldiers who couldn't write, give discourses of a patriotic nature to keep the soldiers from deserting. The chaplain was a very important link between the commander and the troops.

Chaplains have been counseling soldiers since 1775 on things like trying to stay sober; don't cheat at cards; don't gamble away your pay, send it home; all that sort of thing. But in World War II, because the armies were so big, the chaplains got involved in a major way in trying to counsel the soldiers. We even had chaplains in Nuremberg to try to counsel the German POWs.

Chaplains now have additional duties ... funeral duties, premarital counseling duties, religious education duties. Some of them are resource managers; some are historians.

On US Army chaplain history:

[It] is the oldest of the American military chaplaincies. In July 1775, the Second Constitutional Congress voted to pay chaplains \$20 a month ... just above first lieutenants.

At that time there was no authorized uniform, no supervisory chaplain, no doctrine for chaplains. These ministers

showed up at an encampment of the Continental Army and volunteered to be a chaplain for a unit. Of the 218 that served in the Continental Army, about 25 were killed or died in the Revolution. That's 11 percent – the highest casualty rate we ever had in the chaplain corps.

On chaplains in the Civil War:

We actually drafted chaplains in the Civil War ... for one year in 1862.

In the Civil War, their first duty was to advise the commander on the moral and spiritual health of the unit and then make any other suggestions for the happiness of the soldier.

When Col. Ulysses S. Grant took command of the 21st Illinois infantry regiment, he had a Methodist chaplain, James Crane.

[One day] Colonel Grant ordered a soldier to be tied to a tree and whipped for desertion. And so as they began to apply [50] lashes, Colonel Grant [asked Chaplain Crane], "Chaplain do you think this is a good sentence?"

The chaplain said, "I don't think it's my place to say anything about that."

Colonel Grant said, "No, it is your place. You need to advise me about whether what we're doing is what we should be doing ... I know what the law permits; what I want to hear from you is whether you think this is the right thing to do."

The chaplain said, "I think it's an excessive number."

So Colonel Grant stopped at 25.

In 1863 General Grant directed Chaplain John Eaton, 27th Ohio Infantry, to care for the educational and physical needs of the freed slaves who were not already in the Union Army. So an Army chaplain was in charge of one of the first efforts to look after freed slaves.

On World War II chaplains:

In World War II, the chaplaincy went from 145 to 9,111 in one year. Chaplains began to narrow their focus to spiritual duties.

By the time [the war] was over, [there was] an incredible VD [venereal disease] rate in Germany and in Japan. In Heidelberg, where the 7th Army set up its headquarters, commanding officer General Patch had an immediate problem. A number of young German women no longer had their husbands, brothers, or fathers – no way to earn a living. So, there

were an enormous number of brothels ... at least 3,000 VD casualties in that area of the Army at that time. Staff officers wanted to have Army doctors check out the women in the brothels and then assign military police to the front doors to regulate the line, [to] cut down the venereal disease rate.

Chaplain Art Webber, who was a Missouri Synod Lutheran, wanted nothing of that. He got together with other chaplains and went to see General Patch, and said, "We want you to know if this staff action comes through, we'll all resign our commissions on the spot." So they shut down the houses of prostitution, got jobs for the young women, so they could earn an honest living. They reduced the venereal disease rate very fast.

On chaplains in the Vietnam War:

We took some hits as a corps ... [the criticism was] there were many atrocities in Vietnam, and the Army chaplains didn't try and stop them, as they should have.

But on the other side, there was the case of Father Angelo Liteky, who won the Medal of Honor in Vietnam. A Roman Catholic, he saved the lives of 20 soldiers under fire – even though he was wounded – by dragging them back into covered positions. On his second tour, which he volunteered for, he was assigned to a battalion where the policy ... was ... if you brought in five [human] ears to show you had killed five Viet Cong, then you could get leave to Saigon or Cam Ranh Bay.

Father Liteky went ballistic. He said, 'you have turned professional soldiers into barbaric mercenaries.' He went straight up the command until he got to Creighton Abrams, the commander of our troops there.

General Abrams was a good Catholic. He said, 'I agree, Father.'

So they stopped the policy.

But tired of fighting the Army on something so barbaric, he left, got out of the chaplaincy, returned his Medal of Honor.

On chaplains in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars:

Chaplains [have become] intimately involved with family life. A big problem we've had since Operation Desert Storm is that a lot of these units ... their wives are under terrible stress but their husbands have battle fatigue ... we've had emergency rooms full of spouses beaten up by their husbands because they weren't financially responsible while [their husbands were] gone or [wives] accused of having an affair [while their husbands were deployed].

On chaplains' divided loyalties:

Some of our chaplains will not talk about 'just war' anymore; they will talk about a legitimate war or a necessary war. ... [or] 'just intent,' but the result will not be just. And many wars have unjust results. So, in light of all of that ... when should a chaplain protest the policies going on in a combat zone, and to whom should he protest?

His allegiance as a staff officer may conflict with his moral sensibilities as a minister.

[During Operation Iraqi Freedom] we had one chaplain, Glenn Palmer, who saw some American soldiers shoot a boy off a bicycle outside Baghdad. He began a protest. There were no senior chaplains to talk to, he went back to the Baghdad airport; a Newsweek writer saw him there, reported what looked like it was going to be desertion by Chaplain Palmer. But he got the news out, went back to his unit.

Should chaplains leave their units and go looking for somebody to talk to? Or should they do like chaplain Francis Lewis in My Lai: You report to your commander, if he doesn't say anything, you let it go?

So, there is a tension there, a role conflict.

On denominational identity:

The longer chaplains are with their units, the stronger the unit becomes their primary group identity. The Catholic priests are not going to quit being priests.... But you can show, and we have a dissertation from Emory on this in the library, that ... when chaplains retire, they frequently do not go back to their denominations. They set up counseling ministries ... they come back to the Army and attend the Army chapels. It's not so much that the Army has one religion – it doesn't – but the Army chaplaincy does have a bond, and that may grow to be stronger than the bond of the denominations. Now is that something they have to worry about in church and state? I don't think so. But it's something that every chaplain needs to think about.