

Fit for the Fight

When the warrior faces the enemy, the chaplain faces the warrior.

When you see a man or woman in uniform while watching the news, you are watching a chaplain's charge.

First sanctioned by the Continental Congress in 1775, chaplains serve in all branches of the Armed Forces. These men and women represent the vibrant denominational diversity found in the United States and its military.

Chaplains as officers fulfill readiness and professional education expectations required for understanding and serving the military community.

Alongside chaplains are enlisted men and women who facilitate ministry. In the Army and Air Force, these professionals are called Chaplain Assistants. The Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard refer to them as Religious Programs Specialists. These essential enlisted service members celebrated 100 years of ministry partnership with chaplains in 2009.

While chaplains are noncombatants, their assistants have a dual mission. They train to support the chaplain's ministry in an administrative capacity, as well as actively assist in military actions when necessary. They also manage funds and property, create chapels whenever necessary, and are the eyes and ears of the Chaplain Corps. Their embedded presence among the enlisted force earns the trust of those who might not naturally, or easily, turn to a chaplain.

It is no secret that our service branches have unique cultures and missions. Chaplains are charged to perform their ministry in diverse military communities, advocating for all military members to enjoy an unfettered expression of their faith.

Chaplain teams often face their own unique challenges in fulfilling their mission. When a traditional place of worship is not available, chaplains improvise. Worship teams co-opt dayrooms, gather in aircraft hangars, use tents, or create worship spaces in innovative outside gatherings. No matter how extravagant or harsh the circumstances, chaplains strive to preserve spiritual vitality when young civilians put on a uniform. At the other end of the spectrum, the Air Force Academy Chapel rivals any civilian place of worship for splendor here in the United States.

U.S. Air Force Captain Andrew Cohen, a rabbi with the 332nd Air Expeditionary Wing deployed from Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland, leads evening service at Joint Base Balad, Iraq, December 26, 2008. Photo by U.S. Air Force Airman First Class Jason Epley.



In the effort to provide a world-class chaplaincy to meet service members' needs, an Armed Forces Chaplaincy Center at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, is training Army, Navy, and Air Force chaplains to minister to the entire Armed Forces. The joint setting provides a natural opportunity to learn the subtle differences in ministering to soldiers, Marines, sailors, and airmen.

In an era where installations are combining, deployed military members are serving in joint locations, and chaplains sometimes find themselves professionally loaned to another service's population—joint training will reap many benefits.

A chaplain's world is not all worship, however. They serve as principal advisors to commanders for all issues regarding the impact of religion on military operations. They also provide opportunities for military members to express and expand their spiritual core.

Chaplains respond in numerous ways when it comes to meeting service members' spiritual needs. Face-to-face counseling is the most common way as they can be a willing ear, a skillful guide, or an in-

formed professional providing educational opportunities to enrich the warrior's spiritual resources.

Through involvement in unit activities, chaplains become a familiar face for service members. Participating in low-stress events allows troops to learn more about the resources a chaplain has to offer when high-stress periods occur. And they do.

Chaplains encounter our military members in both natural and unnatural transitions of life. They are often called on by service members far from home for those happy events of baptisms and marriages. They also provide invocations at a variety of celebratory events like retirements and promotions.

During a deployment a service member often worries about the welfare of those back home. Chaplains provide home base sustenance for separated families, including marriage enrichment retreats before deployment and reintegration events after the deployment.

When tragedy strikes, however, whether on the battlefield or at home, chaplains are honored to support those in need of what has been called the "the visible reminder of the Holy." The horrors of war require an informed ear to help unburden those who have faced the trauma of the battlefield. Chaplains are there, close to the event, softening the blow when tragedy disrupts lives and sharing in the grief others endure.

On our nation's behalf, service members undergo tremendous physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual challenges as extraordinary, but very human beings preserving freedom. Training continues to prepare them, in every possible way, to defend

freedom from those who would threaten it. These responsibilities test their minds, bodies, and spirits.

Caring for a warrior's soul is a complex calling. Yet, for the thousands who are blessed by that calling, it is a privilege to serve our military, ensuring it is spiritually fit for the fight. ★

—Colonel, Chaplain Tom Malek-Jones serves at the Office of the Command Chaplain, Air Combat Command, Langley Air Force Base, Virginia.

An impromptu chapel provides a moment's peace for service members during the Korean War. Location unknown. USO Archives.



The soldier's heart, the soldier's spirit, the soldier's soul, are everything. Unless the soldier's soul sustains him he cannot be relied on and will fail himself and his commander and his country in the end.

—General George C. Marshall