

The Spiritual Lives of Soldiers: Part I - Preparing for War

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Introduction (Training)

It was my great humble joy to spend the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) as the command chaplain aboard USNS COMFORT. The Navy and the Church had trained me for over 15 years for this role. I was the senior chaplain and the moral and spiritual advisor for the commanding officer who owned the Command Religious Program that I was directly responsible for.

The military, all branches, trains each member for war from the very beginning of their time of service. The US military's main job is to defend our country. From the first day of boot camp or officers' training, each of us had an understanding that we could go to war. Our initial training, and other military education helped us to learn our jobs and to lead others. I spent 7 years out of my 20 years in the Navy as a chaplain at training commands, Navy and Marine Corps. Deploying for any reason, war or otherwise, is a very serious thing. I quickly developed questions for sailors and Marines that would help them to explore their spiritual lives and thus be complete human beings in wartime or in peacetime. Only the chaplain, and this is one of his purposes for being in the military, can prepare the military member in this.

Who are you?

This was the very first question that I have asked sailors, Marines and Coast Guardsmen when they came to talk to me as their chaplain. Nor surprising the usual answer was, "I don't know, sir." After hearing this a few thousand times, I was not surprised. Since most of the military, about 60%, is made up of 18 to 25 year olds, confusion about self is pretty much the norm. My job was to walk them through,

simply, a definition of their spiritual life, which encompassed all of their life. Many had no spiritual development in their own faith, came from dysfunctional families and came into the military, voluntarily since 1973, for a myriad of interesting reasons. I would very often take out my own military ID card and talk about their responsibility to themselves, the oath that they took upon entering, their families and their country. This was basic human being 101 stuff. To say that the young are often confused is an understatement. Throw in young marriages, young families and so on; you have some problems. In the military, each and every one of us belongs to a unit, a small

group of people. In my experience, the Marine Corps and the Coast Guard have the best idea of the unit and how it works.

Living in this military world at shore and at sea can be very hard. At war, who you are and your place in your unit are of paramount importance. As chaplain, I found my job was to help them put themselves together; sometimes this was simple, sometimes not so simple.

I spent countless hours in various training events talking and explaining about simple human topics from the orientation to a unit to every part of military life, including spirituality in the Navy's alcohol rehab program, spirituality on a deployment, and thus spirituality at war.

Another important dimension of the military is leadership. The longer someone is in the service, the more likely they will lead others. I directly led five people during OIF. They were mine. I was directly



