

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



responsible for them 24/7. A good leader needs to do two things. Know your job and know your people. In the military where your job can be very dangerous whether at war or not, good leadership is of utmost importance. As a chaplain, I had a wealth of good leadership examples to use from our Lord to the saints.

One of my most important jobs was to advise the unit's leadership. The chaplain is the only generalist in the military unit. He is concerned with the spiritual welfare of all; and thus must have an idea of their morale at all times. Balancing all of this on a ship at sea was often mind-bending. I certainly prayed a lot for wisdom and understanding in dealing with the many people I would encounter each day.

The last dimension of 'who are you' concerns the nature of the job of the military member. There is a possibility that a military member may have to kill another human being in the line of duty. The military recognizes this possibility and prepares the member in a number of ways. The first, as mentioned above, is training to do your job. And with equal importance, training for safety. Everyone trains and drills safety the moment they come on duty to the moment they leave the service. On a ship, five drills each day, from man overboard to fire control, are not unusual. Marines train with weapons constantly before they are deployed to a war zone. The sailor or Marine knows that after voluntarily joining the service, (there has been no draft since 1973), and months/years of training what their job is. The military provides mental health professionals for those with real mental instabilities. Conscientious Objectors are processed in a very direct way. As a military chaplain, I was directly involved with over 20 conscientious objector cases. I recommended less than half for religious reasons. This very realistic way of working with the job of a sailor or Marine to kill in battle does not overlook the emotions that may come out. Spiritually, each and every member has made clear choices using their free will well before battle.

Where are you?

The second question I often asked my people concerned where they were. This was a double-edged question. The obvious answer would be right here. Some of them got that one. During my over three years at sea, that question could be confusing. During OIF on COMFORT, because over 75% of the sailors had not been on a ship before and also

because of our limited schooling in the USA on geography did not know exactly where we were at. I made it my job (okay, I like maps - charts at sea) to know where we were. That we spent most of our time in the Persian Gulf making an oval 3 miles wide and 12 miles long in the northern part of gulf was a great comfort to much of the crew.

The other edge, for the military, concerns their life on active duty. We are owned by the military, and thus this is not a day job nor is it McDonald's. During wartime this was obvious to most. The question of where are you should also concern your relationship with God. For the unchurched, many people in the military, this is a hard question. To others it was simple. During wartime, especially in the combat zone, many would think about God.

Many would go to church services. Part of my job was to provide the opportunity for services of many faiths. On COMFORT we had 47 services each week from 8 different faith groups and over 60% of crew attended. During predeployment training I often spoke about the military members' relationship with God, their faith community and how that could develop during their time at sea; thus more training, especially about where are you.

Conclusion

The military does a fine job of training their people for their individual job and for being a leader of others. The chaplain's job is to bring all of this together and to constantly remind them that they are human beings made in the image and likeness of God.

The day the war started in March 2006 a young corpsman came up to me on the deck of the ship as we watched the missiles going overhead, the rockets red glare. He asked me whether we would be safe on the ship. Being a little too literal minded at times, I went through a couple minutes talking about where we were and that we were being protected. I realized I was losing him. I reassured him we were safe and here to perform an important job that only this ship and crew could do, heal the wounded. I realized I had waited 15 years for that question. All of the prayers, the training in seminary and in Navy courses came down to a simple question.

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