

100 YEARS

Celebrating a century of religious support, chaplain assistants cast light on their unique role

BY MICHAEL L. LEWIS

You are as likely to find them in the motor pool as in the chapel, and they readily admit to cussing as much as any other Soldier. Yet, they are responsible for helping Soldiers exercise their constitutional right to practice their faith, whatever it is, wherever they may be.

As chaplain assistants celebrate their centennial – 100 years since the Army officially introduced the occupational specialty – they realize their distinctive role in the Army is often misunderstood. In fact, over the last century, their job has evolved from that of a general clerk to a highly trained and essential component within a professional ministry team. Not only are they empathetic listeners within their units, they are also able protectors of their chaplains, who by international law are unarmed noncombatants. Theirs is a unique mix of roles and responsibilities that sets them apart in a stand-alone military occupational specialty; however, it hasn't always been that way.

Since the earliest days of the Continental Army, enlisted personnel have assisted chaplains ministering on the battlefield. Yet, for more than half of the Army's existence, that assistance was unofficial and often fleeting, tacked on as a supple-

ment to a Soldier's primary duties within the unit, which always took precedence.

Then, on Dec. 28, 1909, the Army officially created the position of chaplain assistant, for the first time authorizing a Soldier to provide full-time religious support. The War Department's General Order No. 253 simply read, "One enlisted man will be detailed on special duty, by the commanding officer of any organization to which a chaplain is assigned for duty, for the purpose of assisting the chaplain in the performance of his official duties." But, except for "good moral character," no prerequisite training or special skills were considered necessary for the position. The Soldier filling this role was considered to be only a clerk, with duties entirely administrative in nature, a way of thinking that continued until the Army's 2001 decision to separate chaplain assistants into their own career field – religious support (with an MOS designation of 56M).

"It's changed dramatically since I came in," said Sgt. Maj. Tommy Marrero, the regimental sergeant major of the Chaplain Corps. "I came in when the MOS was 71M, under the 71 series, which was more of an administration MOS. Since then, it has evolved into a highly professional career management field. It is no longer

administration-focused; it's operations-focused."

That new focus more accurately reflects what chaplain assistants are now expected to do, said Sgt. 1st Class Timothy Eye, operations NCO for chaplains in U.S. Army Africa. "We're no longer just administrators. For instance, now I'm the operations NCO; I deal with planning and strategic thinking in relation to religious support on the continent of Africa. I never in a million years would have thought I'd be where I am right now."

LISTENERS & PROTECTORS

Despite the new emphasis on plans and strategy, the crux of a chaplain assistant's duties remains being a receptive ear to Soldiers in need, said Sgt. Maj. Pamela Neal, sergeant major for chaplains in U.S. Army Europe.

"Listening – it's being available to those who need you. That's the basis of the job to me, because you never know when you are going to be the last person

Right: Sgt. Darrell Bowie, NCOIC for the Regimental Chapel at Fort Benning, Ga., prepares for a Friday night Jewish service in December 2009.

Photo by Michael L. Lewis



to listen. You could be the cross between life and death for some people.”

Being available to listen requires being a regular presence wherever Soldiers are every day, said Sgt. 1st Class Norberto Diaz, the senior chaplain assistant at Fort Bliss, Texas.

“It is very important for all chaplain assistants to be with their units, because that’s where we get our meat and potatoes – having face time with the Soldiers, out there doing the same things they do. That’s how you earn their trust, so that they’ll know we are Soldiers just like them,” he said.

Eye agreed. “My bread and butter is down there, in the trenches, with the Soldiers. If you’re in the motor pool turning wrenches and I come by and turn wrenches with you, or if you’re digging a foxhole like we used to and I’m out there digging the same foxhole with you – when you have an issue, words just flow and there’s no hesitation as to whether or not you can trust me.”

Being wherever their Soldiers are also means doing whatever they do, whether it be physical fitness training, weapons qualifications or field exercises, said Sgt. Maj. Monica Dixon, the liaison sergeant major at the Armed Forces Chaplaincy Center, Fort Jackson, S.C. When assigned as a chaplain assistant in the 82nd Airborne Division, that attitude led her to become the first female jumpmaster-qualified chaplain assistant.

“That was my focus when I was in the [82nd] Airborne Division. I needed to set myself to be the same as all these other airborne Soldiers,” she said, noting the same principle applies in other units, too. “If you’re in a [military intelligence] unit, keep focused on matching the progression of the MI Soldiers. Whatever training the MI people are doing, you need to get out there and do the same thing.”

Participating in unit maneuvers and individual training also hones chaplain assistants’ soldiering skills, which directly contribute to perhaps their most important duty – protecting their chaplain. It’s

a responsibility unique within the Army, Diaz said.

“Chaplains are not allowed to carry weapons. So, during deployment, we have to be with them at all times and be their quote-unquote bodyguard,” he said.

“I think we’re the only MOS who carries one weapon for two people,” Marrero added.

But, chaplain assistants aren’t the only ones responsible for providing



Photo by Pfc. Kimberly Cole

Staff Sgt. Miguel Martinez-Velazquez, chaplain assistant NCOIC for the 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, shelters Chaplain (Maj.) Paul Jaedicke from incoming fire during training August 2008 at Fort Polk, La.

chaplains with protection. Indeed, their role is much larger and involves providing coordination and direction, Marrero said.

“I’m right at [the chaplain’s] side. But, one person cannot provide 360-degree protection for the chaplain. That’s why we train our chaplain assistants to integrate force protection for the chaplain wherever he or she goes. For example, when we’re in a convoy, we always tell the convoy leaders, ‘Hey, I’ve got a non-combatant here.’ The role then for the convoy is to protect him and strategically position him.”

Maintaining weapons qualifications and physical fitness above and beyond other Soldiers is key to providing the protection chaplains require, Eye said, recalling his experiences meeting local religious leaders in Iraq.

“Those are very close quarters. When you are sitting down with a bunch of big wigs in a room somewhere, you really don’t have a lot of time to lock and load your weapon. So, it might have to get hands-on,” he said. The desire to be well-trained for those situations led him to become certified in Level 2 combatives before deploying. “In that aspect, I felt more comfortable in close-quarters situations because it made me more confident in my ability to do my job and protect my chaplain down-range.”

That extra training also provides inspiration for the Soldiers under his leadership, he said. “By going through combatives and increasing my skills, number one, I’m showing the Soldiers who are under me that this is what I believe ‘right’ looks like. But, also, [it shows] how much of a combat multiplier you can be.”

BUSTING MYTHS

Actual ministerial duties, such as counseling, giving spiritual advice or providing religious guidance to Soldiers, are strictly left to the chaplain. “We’re chaplain assistants. We’re not assistant chaplains,” Neal asserted.

“That is certainly a myth. We absolutely don’t counsel” as a chaplain does, she said.

“The distinction needs to be made because we don’t have training for that. That area is set aside for medical personnel and for the chaplains, who have a degree or specialization in that field. Chaplain assistants are basically there to bring the Soldier to the chaplain; we’re there to refer. Otherwise, we’re out of our lane.”

Diaz said he advises young chaplain assistants to become well-versed in evaluating, then referring Soldiers who need help. “Sometimes, a Soldier just wants to talk. Then, we can refer them. We can make an assessment – ‘You know, it would be best to talk to a chaplain who is experienced in detail with these kinds of issues’ – or maybe refer them to other agencies. Maybe they have a drinking problem or a drug problem or a financial problem.”

Nonetheless, many chaplain assistants find enlisted personnel are more comfortable talking with them rather than the chaplains.

“There are times, especially during deployments, when the chaplain is out or busy, or sometimes a Soldier will feel more comfortable talking with another enlisted Soldier instead of an officer,” Diaz said. “That’s where I come in – just being a peer to that individual.”

“It has something to do with being less formal,” Eye said. “Because, when you are in a line unit, it’s bred into you that officers are the individuals who you’ll see when there’s some kind of negative action that is being brought unto you. But, being a hard-striper and an NCO with the troops, they see you every day, and it’s a lot easier for them to open up and talk.”

Many Soldiers don’t realize chaplain assistants are bound by the same confidentiality statutes as chaplains, Eye said. Federal law prevents either from divulging the content of a conversation with a Soldier without that Soldier’s permission.

“I tell Soldiers when they talk to me that I’m only bound to tell one other person, and that’s my chaplain. If you don’t want to talk to him, that’s fine. But, with your permission, I’m going to talk to him about what your issues are. Whatever it takes to get you the help you need, I’m going to do my best to do it.”

As much as chaplain assistants strive to blend in with their peers, they are put on a pedestal by some Soldiers, Marrero said, and expected to be highly religious, overly pious or morally perfect.

“The perception some have is that chaplain assistants have huge, huge moral standards. Well, we do have high moral standards; but, we’re also Soldiers who make mistakes. The very religious Soldier who is always in the church or mosque or synagogue, we’re not.”

“A lot of chaplain assistants are normal Soldiers,” Neal said. “And when I say ‘normal,’ I mean some drink, some go to the club, and some get into trouble like any other Soldier. But what’s bad is that the Soldiers in the unit hold us to a higher standard. They expect us to be a bunch of nuns and priests, and we are far from that,” she said.

Sgt. Darrell Bowie, the NCO in charge at the Regimental Chapel, Fort Benning, Ga., has tried to clear up the

same misconception among his Soldiers.

“People think that chaplain assistants are goody two-shoes. But, I always tell my Soldiers, if you see chaplain assistants who [use colorful language], those are probably the best ones because they can relate to you and take care of your problems at the same time.”

In fact, being too religious could actually detract from being effective, he said, for chaplain assistants are required by law to help Soldiers of all religions practice their faith.

“My point of view is that you can either be religious or not,” Neal said. “But, as far as the job is concerned, one has nothing to do with the other. Whether you’re religious or non-religious, you just can’t interfere with someone else’s expression of faith. Or, you can’t interfere with someone else’s *non-expression* of faith. So, if someone determines that they want to be an atheist or Wiccan or whatever, you have to support any and every spectrum of someone’s expression of faith.”

Bowie said that the job is tougher than some Soldiers realize. Even he underestimated it at first.

“I kind of underrated it; I thought it was an easy, sham job. But, it’s a lot harder than it seems, especially if you deploy,” he said. “There will be a lot of command sergeants major and battalion commanders who look to you, and you have more responsibility than you realize. As a private, you have to act like an NCO, right off the bat.”

The enhanced expectations come with the job, Neal said. “We work with commissioned officers every single day. So, you have to be mature. You have to be no-nonsense. And, you have to be proficient at what you do.”

But, despite others’ misconceptions, Marrero is proud of the myriad of tasks that chaplain assistants accomplish daily in the course of supporting the religious needs of their units.

“From setting up a chapel, to coordinating volunteers, to safeguarding the offering monies – the most important thing is ensuring that every Soldier can enhance their spiritual life. It’s a very behind-the-scenes job, but we do it with professionalism. We do it quietly.” 

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Chaplain Assistants: A timeline

1778: As early as the American Revolutionary War, enlisted Soldiers serve as ad hoc assistants to Army chaplains. However, these temporary assistants rarely help with ministerial duties.

1866: The Army allows competent enlisted Soldiers to be detailed to teach basic school subjects under the auspices of the local chaplain, who serves as the schoolmaster.

1902: Calvin P. Titus is awarded the Medal of Honor by President Teddy Roosevelt for actions performed as a corporal during the Boxer Rebellion. While in his infantry unit, he drew from his family’s background in ministry to serve as his chaplain’s unofficial assistant.

1909: On Dec. 28, the War Department officially establishes the chaplain assistant position, though no training or organization was specified. About 60 chaplains are in the Army at this time.

1920: The Chaplain Corps is established as a separate branch for officers.

1933: The first unofficial school for chaplain assistants is established in San Antonio, Texas. However, it pertained mostly to administrative duties, not religious support. The maximum pay grade is E-5.

1950s: During the Korean War, chaplain assistants receive the MOS of 71B, in the same career field as administrative aides, such as payroll and postal clerks. A new four-week chaplain assistant course opens at Fort Dix, N.J., and Fort Ord, Calif.

1965: In August, after a major rewrite of the MOS classification system, chaplain assistants are redesignated 71M. The maximum pay grade for a chaplain assistant is now E-7.

1966: Chaplain assistant training is consolidated at Fort Hamilton, N.Y.

1972: Chaplain assistant training is integrated into the NCO Education System.

1974: The unit ministry team concept is developed, whereby chaplain assistants are given more responsibilities regarding religious support. The same year, the Chaplain School moves to Fort Wadsworth, N.Y., then Fort Monmouth, N.J., in 1979.

1985: Chaplain assistants receive their own branch insignia, a stylized set of hands surrounding a chapel with open doors.

1986: The chaplaincy is designated a regiment, and a regimental crest is developed, featuring the corps’ motto – “Pro Deo et Patria,” which in Latin means, “For God and Country.”

1995: The Chaplain School moves to its current home at Fort Jackson, S.C.

2001: In October, the Army redesignates chaplain assistants as 56M, a stand-alone MOS in its own career management field – religious support.

2009: The Department of Defense begins collocating the chaplain schools for all branches at the newly designated Armed Forces Chaplaincy Center at Fort Jackson. There are now more than 3,400 chaplain assistants and 2,700 chaplains Armywide.