

"The Role Today of Combat Chaplains"

Major General Cecil Richardson

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Question: We're very pleased to have the Chaplain of the Air Force. As such, he is Senior Pastor to the entire Air Force and chief of 2,200 Air Force chaplains, I believe. Major General Cecil Richardson, thank you.

MajGen Richardson: Well good afternoon, everyone. Oh wow, what a great microphone. I love that. Good afternoon to all of you. I want to begin just by saying thank you. Thank you for who you are. Thank you for what you stand for. Thank you for what you do for your country. Thank you for what you've done for your country. Thank you for the faith and the interest in the chaplain service that brings you to this particular briefing. I realize there are others going on. And thank you for what you've done for chaplains through the years.

Did you hear the one about the priest and the rabbi and the two protestant ministers that went out for a cruise late one night? It sounds like I'm starting a joke, but it's not. It's one of the most inspiring and powerful stories in the history of America. It was the USS Dorchester in February of 1943. It was a troop ship that was crossing the Atlantic. They were told, the hundreds of troops - 900 of them - they were told to keep their life vests on because there were German U-boats in the area.

But it was hot down in the bottom of the ship, even though it was February, and they were having trouble sleeping, so many of them took off their life vests and slept on the life vest. Many of them took off their external clothing and, wouldn't you know, in the middle of the night they were hit by two torpedoes and began to sink rapidly. Hundreds of these soldiers came up from the bottom of the ship because the ship was already listing, and they began to frantically look for life vests because they had lost their life vests down in the hold of the ship.

There were four chaplains on that particular ship, on the USS Dorchester. There was a rabbi, a Roman Catholic priest, and two protestant chaplains. The four chaplains broke into the ship's hull, and they broke in and started taking out life vests and frantically throwing them to all these soldiers. And it wasn't very long, though - within just a few minutes - they had used up all their life vests

and then - true story, February 1943 on the USS Dorchester - each one of the four chaplains took off his own life vest and handed it to a soldier and said jump and save your life.

And as the soldiers bobbed up and down in the water in that frigid February evening, through the moonlight they saw the four soldiers on the ship standing side-by-side, but the ship suddenly went like this and the four chaplains, lieutenant Army chaplains, they linked their arms and they walked their way up to the top, the peak of the ship. They began to sing a song together, and then each one of them prayed for the men in the water and then the ship went under.

What a picture. What a picture of what it means to be a chaplain, a combat chaplain. What a picture of what it means to give yourself, literally, for the life of your troops. What a picture for what we can be, guys, what we should be, and what we want to be as military chaplains.

I served as the CENTCOM chaplain for three years, the Command Chaplain for the United States Central Command. I served as AFCENT or CENTAF chaplain for three more years. I've been to the Persian Gulf at least 40 or 50 times, maybe many times more than that. Every time I go I marvel at the quality of our people there. I was just there in Afghanistan just a couple of weeks ago, to Afghanistan, Kuwait, and Qatar. Every time I go as I meet the young people I find myself realizing once again why I don't call them the Y Generation or X Generation or Z Generation like so many, but I call them the A+ Generation because they are absolutely the finest young people I have ever seen in my life.

It amazes me that our recruiters can go into the malls and movie theatres of America and pull these young people away from their video games and their skateboards and cover up their tattoos and pull the earrings off their ears and pull their pants back up around their waists and turn them into the finest Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines the world has ever seen.

A couple of years ago I spoke at a megachurch in Dallas, one of those huge, huge churches - a civilian church. I always speak in uniform and tell them about the wonderful men and women of the military, but in that particular church, afterwards, lots of people stayed afterwards to talk to me.

And after I had talked to several dozen, a little lady, a little blue-haired lady, a Texas lady, came up to me and

she spoke to me in the way that only blue-haired Texas ladies can speak and she said to me, "Are you a minister?" And I said, "Well yes, ma'am, I am." I mean I had just preached the sermon; I thought it was pretty obvious.

And she said, "Well I thought that all ministers were anti-war." And I looked at her with a stunned look and I said, "Well yes, ma'am, they are; all ministers are anti-war. In fact, it would be interesting for you to know that all military people are anti-war. All firemen are anti-fire. All policemen are anti-crime. But sometimes in a fallen world you have a fire. And thank God for those wonderful, wonderful people who will put on protective outfits and go into the fire and risk their own lives to save innocent people. And sometimes in a fallen world you have crime. And thank God for those guys who will pin a badge on their chests and go into a perilous situation and raise up their hand in defiance against the bad guys and protect the innocent. And sometimes in a fallen world you have a war. And thank God for those wonderful young men and women who will put a uniform on and stand up and defend their country."

And then I told her a story that I had read in my favorite book. My favorite book is kind of a thick book; it's divided into two parts, the older part and the newer part. And I was reading this in the newer part. It's in about the fourth section of the newer part, and it told a story about a man who had worked hard that day and he was just walking on home but as he walked home a bunch of bad guys jumped in, and they beat the tar out of him. They pounded on him. They took all of his possessions. They ripped his clothes off his body, and they left him bleeding to the point that he was almost dead.

A chaplain walked by. The chaplain looked at him and said, "Aw it's probably a trap," and the chaplain just left - went on by. And then a chaplain assistant came by, and the chaplain assistant looked at him and said, "Boy I'd sure like to help the guy but I've got to go set up for mass," so the chaplain assistant just went on. And then a member of a cursed outcast group, a JAG came by. [Laughter]. And the JAG took care of him, the JAG picked him up. The JAG poured oil in his wounds. The JAG cared for him, and the JAG put him on his donkey and took him to the inn, and the JAG paid the innkeeper to take care of him. And you know the story. It's the story of the Good Samaritan, and it's used by all major religions as an illustration of how we ought to treat one another.

But think for a minute of what it would be like if the Good Samaritan had gotten there a half hour beforehand. Let's say the Good Samaritan got there while they were beating the guy up, while they were ripping off his clothes and taking his things. Then what would have been the right thing to do? What would have been the religious thing to do, or the Christian thing to do?

I submit unto you that the right thing to do would have been to have intervened, to protect the innocent, to have jumped into the fray and said don't hurt this guy. What if you have to use violence? Jump into the fray and say don't hurt this guy. What if you have to hurt the bad guy? Jump into the fray and use violence if you have to to protect the innocent. What if you have to kill the guy? Jump into the fray, do whatever you have to do to protect the innocent. That's known as the Just War Theory.

But suppose that the Good Samaritan had got there - not a half hour beforehand but an hour beforehand. Suppose he was walking along and he looked down and he saw this hapless fellow walking along, coming home from work, and nothing had happened. And the Good Samaritan looked up and looked into the rocks and he saw a bunch of bad guys. He knew them, he recognized them, they were murderers, cutthroats, robbers. And they had their bows pulled back and they had their swords drawn, and they were ready to jump the guy as soon as he came around the rocks. He could see them. Then what would be the right thing to do?

I submit unto you that the right thing to do would be to intervene and protect the innocent, even though nothing had happened. The right thing to do would be to jump in there, use violence if necessary, and protect the bad guys from hurting the innocent. That's known as the Theory of Pre-emptive Strike.

And so the next time some leftist flag-burning freedom-hating whacko jumps on you about supporting the military, you just tell them your chaplain said that you're being a Good Samaritan.

I've been a chaplain now for over 30 years. I've walked on our nation's battlefields. I've stood in bombed-out buildings with my uniform saturated with blood. I've carried human remains in my hands, and I've held the hands of brave Americans who were breathing their last and going to be with God. I've sat by the hospital beds of some of the greatest heroes our worlds have ever known, and I've stood as recently as two weeks ago in Arlington National

Cemetery and said a final goodbye to those who had given their all in service to our country.

And yet, after all these years, every time I hear the national anthem, every time I stand at attention, every time I face the flag, every time I watch our flag waving against the blue sky, something happens deep within me as I salute, and I realize once again what a privilege it is to be an American, what an honor it is to wear a uniform, and what a blessing it is to live in a country that honors the right of its men and women in uniform to freely exercise their faith in God.

The presence of a religious leader on the battlefield is an ancient custom that in many ways predates even the Bible. And the Bible records that the Israelites brought the priests into battle with them. We read about it in various parts of the Hebrew scriptures, especially in First Chronicles.

But when the Hebrews went into battle they sent the band in first. They were the Special Ops troops; they were the first ones in there. The band went in with trumpets announcing the size of the army, and then the second ones in were the priests, but the priests had prepared them beforehand with prayers.

The first battle in recorded history was fought by the patriarch, Abraham, to rescue his nephew Lot. The story is recorded in Genesis, chapter 14, and it mentions a chaplain, one named Melchizedek, who ministered to Abraham and to his troops. And I might be stretching it just a little, but I think it's fair to say that you'll find chaplain ministry throughout the Hebrew and the Christian scriptures.

Samuel was a chaplain to Saul, and Nathan was a chaplain to David, and Isaiah was a chaplain to Uzziah, and in the Christian scriptures, it talks about John the Baptist ministering to the soldiers, and Jesus giving his highest compliments to the soldiers, and Peter being a chaplain to Cornelius, and Paul being a chaplain to the Roman Guard. In fact, Paul's writing - the Apostle Paul's writings of the epistles - they are saturated with military metaphors.

The modern military chaplaincy can be traced back to St. Martin of Tours, a Roman soldier who ripped his coat in two and gave part of it to a beggar and had a vision that night that the beggar was actually Jesus. And St. Martin of Tours became the first modern chaplain. In fact, the word cloak or coat was capella or capeline in French, and it became chaplain.

In America, it was George Washington himself who insisted on having chaplains in the military. And he was the first one to say, not only do I want them in every military unit in our entire Army, but I also want them to be non-combatants. To that point, chaplains had carried weapons. But George Washington says no, I want them to solely focus on the spiritual welfare of our men.

In 1775, before the Constitution was even written, the Continental Congress actually gave birth to the military chaplaincy when it instituted pay for chaplains.

Ours is a nation that has historically believed in God. Our ancestors came to America because they wanted to worship God in freedom. The most well-known and often quoted section of the Declaration of Independence focuses on God. When it says, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights."

America was not formed as a nation apart from God, but one nation under God. The beginnings of America can be traced to a religious heritage as reflected in our state constitutions, our Declaration of Independence, and our Constitution of the United States. Every day in every way America recognizes God. Our unofficial national anthem is God Bless America. Our oath of enlistment ends with, "So help me God." Our national motto is "In God We Trust." Americans are among the most religious people on earth. Over 90 percent of Americans believe in a divine power, and over 82 percent actually claim a specific religion.

Today I want to talk to you about the free exercise of religion, specifically in the Air Force, and the work and ministry of combat chaplains. And I need to use the term combat chaplains a little bit awkwardly in a sense that there really is no such thing as a combat chaplain; that's an oxymoron. I mean, chaplains are non-combatants. We don't fly the airplanes, we don't guard the perimeter, we don't gather intel on our enemies.

Our job is to provide pastoral care and the opportunity for free exercise of religion to those who have joined the military. Our job is to be there with them, no matter what, even in the midst of combat.

The chaplaincy exists because Americans have a right to freely exercise their faith. I'm always impressed and humbled when I witness a young man or a young woman with right hand raised speaking the words, "I will support and

defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic."

These words are words of self-sacrifice and service, and they are largely bred into young people through faith development, and they're nurtured by a person's church and by a person's family. And the key role of the chaplain corps is to ensure that every young man and woman willing to take such an oath is afforded the right guaranteed by the Constitution. Our first freedom - that is the free exercise of religion.

Ministry is rich, and it is deep, and it is far from trivial in a combat zone. The reality of being in a warzone in a life and death situation, the dirt, the heat, the brutality, the austere conditions, the separation from family and familiar surroundings; these things cause people to think about what's important in life.

"The months are short," one young man said to me in Afghanistan a couple of weeks ago, "but the days are long, and it gives you lots of chance to think." Much of the trivial is set aside when you're in a deployed environment and you think about what's important, like family and faith and freedom and friends, and sometimes football.

There's no Sunday, no Sabbath, in the AOR. No Sabbath in war. Chapel attendance seems to go up or down based upon the number of mortar attacks or rocket attacks the night before. And the chaplain's prayer life changes radically from his or her stateside routine.

In a deployed environment, the chaplain's most repeated prayer is for the men and women of the unit, that every one of them would get back safely. The chaplain prays over convoys and over missions as they depart, and often done with a holy huddle - that is everyone gathering around with a chaplain with his arms around them, or with the chaplain in the center of them, praying for them, for their safety, that they might return once they go outside the wire.

When you see a chaplain over in the desert or in the CENTCOM AOR, you will notice the chaplain always fiddling with his leg. He's got a package here in his pocket on his ABU pants. What's in there? A long piece of paper or a little notebook. What's that all about? It's his prayer list. Chaplains can't walk from one place to another without people stopping them saying, "Chaplain, my 11-year-old daughter just broke her arm. Would you pray for her? She really misses her daddy." "My wife just had a baby, Chaplain. Would you pray for my wife?" "Chaplain, my

grandmother's only been given a year to live and I can't go home. I've got another eight months here, but Chaplain, would you pray for my grandmother?"

Air Force Chaplain Derek Harris, a traditional Air Force Reservist at the APOD in Kuwait, the PAX terminal, wrote to me a few days ago, and I'd like to share a few things about what he said.

He said, and I quote, "There's a silent battle being waged by our troops here that often goes unnoticed. I've gained profound respect for the young men and women who serve, for though they may be tender in years their shoulders are bent by the trials they face, both on the battlefield and on the home front. There are stories of wives meeting soldiers at the airport with divorce papers, bank accounts emptied after troops send their checks home to be deposited. There are stories of unfaithfulness, of children unprovided for, of parents dying, of tragedy, of disappointment, of betrayal. I've sat with our troops as they cry and pray and hope. In a quiet place in my heart I hold each one of them near, and I pray for their healing, for restoration, for God's peace that passes understanding."

Chaplain Harris goes on to say, quote, "Today I entered a tent and saw a young female Marine sitting in a chair alongside the walkway. I asked her how she was doing. She assured me she was fine, but for some reason I asked her again, and I told her there was a chaplain's office close by and she could go sit there if she wanted to. She took me up on the offer, and on our way to the office she told me that her brother had just been killed in a motorcycle accident back in the States."

"What do you say," Chaplain Harris writes "in a moment like that? We just sat down together in silence and after a while I said to her, 'Do you know the Lord's Prayer?' 'Yes,' she said, 'But not in English.' So she prayed it in Spanish while I prayed it in English. Only in the military chaplaincy," he writes "could you find a 50-something African-American Baptist pastor in an Air Force uniform praying with a 20-year old female Hispanic Catholic soldier in two different languages. It was a God moment, and it was beautiful."

One thing all combat chaplains notice is that young people entering the military today are as spiritually hungry as any generation ever, but they're largely ungrounded in their faith. They're biblically, spiritually, ecclesiologically illiterate. They've never been to Sunday School, most of them. They've not been to CCD, they've not

been to rabbinical school or Hebrew classes. In my many trips in the AOR, I've talked with lots and lots of my Muslim counterparts as I talked to the senior Muslims in their military, or sometimes they only have one rank in the military.

I'll talk with them, and after we share the customary greetings and a meal I'll ask them about what they do with their militaries, and I'll find that they have the same concerns we do. Their people are largely uneducated in their faith. They're sincere Muslims. They are genuine Muslims. They proclaim that there's no God but Allah and that Mohammad is his prophet, but beyond that, beyond maybe the Five Pillars, they don't know anything about their faith. They are lacking in their religious education. They have the same issues that we have, and yet even though these young people are lacking in the knowledge of their faith, they are yearning for the faith.

Just a few years ago, I was speaker at the Pakistani Chief of Chaplains Conference. They have quite a few Muslim chaplains in Pakistan, but they also have 16 Christian chaplains and they asked me to come and give a keynote speech at their conference.

All of the Pakistani chaplains are captains, except the Chief of Chaplains, who is a brigadier general, but he's not a chaplain, he's an MWR officer. And I met with him before I went out there to speak, and we sat down with the tea and we talked a little while. He was British-educated - and very, very good English - but as we were sharing tea he turned to me and he said, "Chaplain Richardson, we have a sex problem in the Pakistani military."

And I thought, oh no, why me. I blush so easy, I get so rattled. Oh no.

"Yes, we have various sects of Islam and various sects of Christianity, and the job of the chaplain is to pull these different sects together and to make them into one military force." And I said, "Oh yes, we have the same problem." Yes, that's what chaplains do, too. Chaplains pull them together and make them into one fighting military force.

And the AOR chaplain can't walk from point A to point B without being pulled aside by someone who has a question for the chaplain. In fact, our chaplains will often work 7-10 hours a day just in counseling before they go out to do the rest of their work. Meeting with Airmen who will say,

"Chaplain, let me tell you my story, and Chaplain, will you pray for me?"

When chaplains bow their head at a dignified transfer of a human remain or when they go to a memorial service in an aircraft hangar, they're going to ask the chaplain about life and about death and about eternity. It's a reminder that religious faith is universal and is multid denominational and it's very, very, very relevant to today's world. I've found that military people want to hear a word from the Lord. I've found that our Airmen want to hear something positive in the midst of all the world's negatives. I've found that our Air Force people desperately yearn to hear that God loves them and that God has a plan for their lives and that they can hope in the Lord and hope in the future.

In the early 1950s, there was a young man stationed in Hawaii - a true story - he was rushing off to the airport to fly back to the mainland to get married, and as he rushed to the airport he totaled his car, and it just so happened he totaled it in front of a chaplain's house. The chaplain came out and identified himself and said, young man, don't worry. And the guy was so shook he was saying I've got to get to the airport, I've got to get to the airport. The chaplain says no problem, no problem, just take my car, go on to the airport, when my wife gets home then she'll take me out there and we'll be able to get my car and get back; no problem at all. I'll call a tow truck and have this thing hauled away. And so the man took the chaplain's car, and he took off - true story - he drove about three blocks and totaled the chaplain's car. The chaplain saw it. The chaplain went running down there. The young man was all right, but the chaplain was just huffing and puffing and saying, look, I know you're upset. I know you're really, really, really beside yourself here, but you've got to get to the airport. Let me call a taxi. We'll get you to the airport. I have insurance. I'll take care of this. Don't worry a thing about it. And so the guy went to the airport and flew back to the States and got married.

Well fast forward 40 years where [Willy Skepernance] and I were together. In 1995, I became the Executive Director of the Armed Forces Chaplains Board. I'd only been there one day when I got a call that the new Assistant Secretary of the Air Force wanted to talk to me. He was brand new. And the three-star General, Army General, was all concerned. What's he talking to the chaplain for? What's this all about? You know, that's not on the agenda. But he insisted on talking to the chaplain. And so I came in, and I was struck by the appearance of the office and by the appearance of this man who was so well dressed and so

polished and professional. And we sat down together and introduced ourselves and he said, "Chaplain," he said, "Chaplain, when I was young lieutenant I was stationed in Hawaii and I was rushing off to get married." And he told me the story I just told you. And at the end of it he said, "But Chaplain, I'm Buddhist, but really I'm not very religious at all. I just don't do religion. But I want you to know as long as I'm the Assistant Secretary, the Chaplaincies, the Army, Navy, Air Force will never lack for anything because I owe the chaplains."

I don't know who that chaplain was. I'll never know his name. I'll never know his rank. I'll never know anything about him. I only know that I owe him because chaplain wasn't just what he did, it was who he was. The history of the Chaplain's Service is the record of men and women who walked alongside their people, praying with them and sweating with them, and laughing with them, and crying with them, and telling them the Good News of the Gospel of God.

Somewhere out there today is a young Air Force person who is grieving because his mother is dying of cancer. It will be the chaplain who finds him and puts his arm around him and prays with him and helps him find a flight back home and takes care of him. Somewhere out there today is a young Air Force commander that's just getting ready to smash the coffee cup up against the wall and give up and storm out and say I've had enough of this Air Force. It will be the chaplain who finds her and gives her a word of encouragement and tells her that her people appreciate her and they think the world of her and that she's got a great future and what she's doing is very, very important.

Chaplain ministry is giving and not counting the cost, fighting and not heeding the wounds, failing and not seeking rest, laboring and not seeking any reward except the reward of knowing that we are in the will of God doing exactly what God called us to do.

The Air Force Chaplain Corps has deployed its people continuously since April of 1990. We've deployed thousands of chaplains and chaplain assistants. Right now, there are 115 chaplains deployed to 41 locations in the CENTCOM AOR.

In addition to that, we have two chaplain teams supporting humanitarian relief in the Republic of Georgia. We have several teams who are assigned to Air Force Special Ops, who routinely deploy with their units. There are hosts of ways in which we support the warfighters. Chaplains and chaplain assistants lead humanitarian missions and work

projects to orphanages and to schools, and we even have Catholic and protestant chaplains building Muslim religious centers.

We have hospital ministry teams that provide ministry support, religious support to our wounded warriors at Balad and Bagram and Landstuhl. Our chaplains visit the patients and counsel and pray on the wards. They do pastoral ministry and ministry to the medical staff. They provide worship services and religious rites to the patients and to the staff.

We have religious support teams at Dover Mortuary, who honor our fallen and participate in the dignified transfers and provide counseling and pastoral ministry to those who work with the human remains. We have teams at three stateside Predator bases who are supporting those who fight the war from the United States but see things that are going on over there. They see far away, but they also see up close, and we help them deal with the lethal impact of what they're doing.

The Chaplain Corps is also a total force, and joint. The Air Guard fills 20 percent of our taskings, and the Reserves another 10 percent. And one out of every three of our deployments is to a joint location. We have chaplains in Afghanistan who are FOB-hopping. That is Forward Operating Bases going out to these different FOBs.

My son is a chaplain, and in about a week and a half or so he will deploy to Kandahar and then go out to seven different forward operating bases where he will be the only Air Force person with seven Army units, and he will be their chaplain, working by helicopter or convoy, taking care of them.

We have Air Force chaplains at the Joint Operations Centers in Baghdad, at the Multinational Corps in Iraq, at CENTCOM and SOUTHCOM and STRATCOM. We have an Air Force chaplain who's at the ISAF - the International Security Assistance Force in Kabul, in Afghanistan. We deploy to provide ministry to those who are doing drug interdiction in South America and counterterrorism operations in the Philippines. We have chaplains who are working with those who are doing theatre security operations in the South Pacific. It is chaplains and chaplain assistants who provide ministry to Soldiers and Marines as well as to Airmen as they transit in and out of the AOR at Kuwait or Qatar or Kirgizstan.

Combat chaplains are force multipliers, sustaining warfighters by maintaining a battlefield presence and sharing common hardships. Warriors turn to the chaplains when they can't turn to anybody else, and they ask the chaplain why, why are we doing this. And they'll walk along with the chaplain, and they'll hear the chaplain's opinions and share the chaplain's heart.

One of my chaplains told me recently, just last week, about an incident in which a service member had a death in the family and couldn't return home for the funeral. And so the chaplain and the chaplain assistant got up in the middle of the night and went to that person, and at exactly the precise time when they were having the funeral back in the States the chaplain and chaplain assistant, just the three of them along with this person, held a little funeral service with that person so that in some ways he could be with his family. That's what it means to be a combat chaplain.

And the AEF, the Air Expeditionary Force, works great for us. Through the years we've deployed thousands of chaplains. But it works on the premise that when you deploy all these people forward, then you're going to have less to work with or less work to do back here in the States, where in reality it's just the opposite. We deploy our chaplains forward. We deploy at the same rate as the rest of the Air Force, but our work load stateside goes up.

With a reduced staff back there, with less chaplains and less chaplain assistants, we are working with marriages and we are working with families where Mommy and Daddy is going overseas. We're working with people who are preparing to go and want to build a foundation for their lives before they go. We work with broken people who are shuddering with tears in their eyes, and people who are stuttering in their voices coming back from over there, people who can't sleep for the things they've seen. We're working with them and we're working with a reduced staff and we're working long, long, long hours stateside.

We love what we're doing but we can only do it so long. The number one priority of the United States Air Force right now, as it should be, is to win the war on terror, so the number one priority of the Air Force Chaplain Corps is warrior care, taking care of our warriors, taking care of their marriages, strengthening their families, helping singles build a foundation of faith to stand on so when they deploy to the most difficult place they've ever gone in their whole lives they'll be able to stand.

And some people say, well how are military chaplains different than civilian clergy? Military chaplains are civilians in uniform. They are clergy in uniform, but there is an important distinctive. Military chaplains are trained to be able to minister on the battlefield, minister to a base population. I could hire a Methodist minister, for instance, to minister to a stateside base perhaps, but I couldn't deploy that minister. And if I did deploy him, he wouldn't know how to survive and thrive and minister in a combat environment because he wouldn't know how to stay alive. Also, he could only minister to Methodists. That's the way it works. Where chaplains minister to all.

I'm a Christian chaplain. Do you see the cross? I pound the pulpit for Jesus. I call people to believe in Jesus. I preach Christ crucified and risen from the dead. I'm a Christian chaplain, and that's what I do. But there's a time when I'm a chaplain to all, not just a pastor to Christians. If there's a Jew on the base, I'm his chaplain and I'll take care of him. And I want to make sure that he gets a chance, or she gets a chance, to worship freely. If there's a Muslim on base, who is the chaplain? I am.

I used to convert my office at CENTCOM to a Muslim prayer room and lay out a prayer rug so that the Muslim can pray. Why? Because I was that person's chaplain. I wasn't their pastor; I was a Christian, but I was their chaplain. What if there are other faith groups on base? Well, I'm their chaplain and I want to make sure that every American who raises his or her hand to support and defend the Constitution of the United States can practice their faith.

Whenever I visit wounded warriors at Walter Reed or Bethesda, and I often do, the Soldiers, the Sailors, or Airmen or Marines will tell me about their chaplain, saying the chaplain was there when I needed him. And their moms and dads on the other side of the bed, I can look at the Soldier and I can look at the Airman, and I can look at the Marine, but I get all teary-eyed when I look at Mom and Dad across the bed.

Their Mom and Dad will break into tears when they recount the stories about how the priest was there all the way through it, from the time their son or their daughter was injured. They break into tears when they recount the story of how the rabbi traveled with them with the Humvee, or how the protestant minister stayed on his knees and prayed for them all night long until he was transferred to Landstuhl.

Sharing common hardships in a combat environment leads us to great credibility for the combat chaplain. It's a matter of the shepherd knows his sheep. That's what it's all about.

I read in a book one time about a guy who owned a lot of sheep. Lots of them, like maybe a hundred. And one day as he was going through the sheep he noticed one of them was gone, and so he left the ninety and nine and went looking for the one. And while he was gone, I mean everybody was saying, "Where's the shepherd? I haven't seen the shepherd. Where's the chaplain? The chaplain hasn't been in my work area. Haven't seen the chaplain. Where's the shepherd?" But one day, one day the shepherd came back with the sheep over his shoulders and everybody rejoiced. Everybody. Why? Well, because the sheep was found. But also, they rejoiced because way deep down, they knew that had they been lost the shepherd would have gone after them too.

That's what it means to be a combat chaplain. I don't care who you are. I'm going after you. I'm going to be your pastor. I'm going to be your encourager. I'm going to be your chaplain. I'm going to take care of you and make sure that you can practice, not my faith, but your faith. That's what it's all about. Air Force chaplains and chaplain assistants gather with every branch of service to conduct Catholic mass or do Orthodox feasts or celebrate Hanukah in the remote places and under austere conditions.

I remember when I was at CENTCOM, I was the Command Chaplain of CENTCOM, I was visiting over in the desert in Saudi Arabia, and I was visiting a fairly large unit but they were spread out, and I went out on a tracked vehicle one night with the security forces, and we were going to do the whole perimeter, a 60-mile perimeter, and we rode with the tracked vehicle, and I rode all night long with them. But the next morning was Easter, and I said to the guys, I said, "Guys I'd like to have an Easter worship service tomorrow morning with you guys if you can just stay around just a little bit longer. I know you're going to be tired after this, but stay around."

And so they got on the radio and they radioed in to their headquarters saying, hey the chaplain has offered to do a worship service for us for Easter, so if anybody wants to come, tell them we're going to be out in this part of the desert. We got out there, and I stood up on top of the tracked vehicle, because I wanted to be able to see out to the guys. Chaplains like to be up in a pulpit. I stood up on top of it, and these people started streaming, and before long there were hundreds upon hundreds and hundreds and

hundreds and hundreds of Soldiers and Marines and Airmen coming up out of the desert.

There in the cold, cold March morning in Saudi Arabia singing "I Serve a Risen Savior". Air Force chaplains and chaplain assistants have transformed ordinary places in the harshest environments into sacred places of worship and hope. We offer prayers in guard towers and briefing rooms. We offer worship services on airplanes and tents and hangars. We offer counseling in the privacy of a Humvee or under the starlit night.

In a deployed and dangerous environment, the phrase is honoring the dead. And it takes on even more meaning as we meet with the units after a death and as we weep with the guys and as we pray with them, as we minister to them, as we befriend them, as we tell them that we also knew Sergeant Johnson or Sergeant Jones.

I'm a product of the military draft. I think some of you know that. I was drafted during Vietnam, and whenever I visit the Vietnam Memorial - it's not too far from here - it's more than just a history lesson for me. I see the names on the wall there of guys that I went to school with, guys that I knew, guys that I was young with. I honor them. I honor them for what they did for our country.

And I remember when we received our draft notice in the mail, all of us were 18 years old, and we didn't know much about the military. We didn't know what we were in store for. We didn't know what it meant even to serve, because we didn't know anybody who was in the military. But we knew we served a great country, and we wanted to be there and do what was right.

But there was one guy in our group, a guy named Denny. Denny was afraid of the draft, and he didn't want to enlist and he didn't want to leave home, but rather than burning his draft card and rather than running off to Canada like so many did in those days, Denny took a shotgun and went out behind his house and he set the shotgun on his foot and Denny blew his foot off.

He didn't want to pass the physical, and he didn't pass the physical. He didn't want to be drafted, and he wasn't drafted. He didn't want to serve his country, and he never served this country one day in his life. And I would say to you that Denny lost more than a foot that day.

For Denny has never known the pride of wearing a military uniform. He has never looked in a mirror and

straightened up his brass and worked on his ribbons and polished a little bit on his nametag. Denny has never looked in a mirror and counted his stripes. Denny has never known what it's like to be saluting and watch the flag flying. And he's never known that feeling you get from listening to the strains of the national anthem. "Now conquer we must when our cause it is just, and this be our motto, in God is our trust." And Denny has never known what it's like to be a part of a band of brothers and sisters who more than self their country love.

And today, my friends, Denny works in southwest Wisconsin at a local high school and he limps through the hallways on a wooden foot. He paid a high price to disqualify himself from serving his country. I was drafted, and the rest of the guys were drafted, too, but I don't think any of us ever regretted it.

When I was drafted, I was an unruly undisciplined person. I had no vision, I had no ambition, I had no hope of bettering myself. I was just a young kid drifting without an anchor, hoping to get into college with almost zero chance. I was raised in the poorest of Appalachia. My father was severely handicapped. Most of my family, to this day, can't read or write. I was always getting in one fight after another, and I was always running from the police. I had no spiritual foundation, and I had never been in church in my whole life.

Then one day I got that draft notice. The guys in the factory where I was working - I was 18 years old but working in a factory - the guys in the factory said well Cecil, if you join the military instead of getting drafted you might be able to go to school, and they knew more than anything I wanted to go to a school, and so I did. I went down that very next day. I was working nights, and I went down the next day to the recruiters, and I saw Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines. And I thought Marines, that's me. So I joined the Marines.

I went back to the factory that night, and I said to the guys, well guys, I joined the Marines yesterday. And one of them, maybe it was an angel, I don't know, but one of the guys in the group said - I remember it so well - said oh Cecil, the Air Force has nicer uniforms. And it's not true. It's not true at all, I mean Marine uniforms are awesome, but I'd never been around the military, I didn't know, so the next day, the next morning, I went back and I went to the Air Force recruiter and I said, look, yesterday I joined the Marines, but can I go in the Air Force instead? And he said, well as long as you come in to the Air Force before

you were supposed to come in to the Marines, yeah. So that's how I got in the Air Force. [Laughter]. It's a true story.

I will never ever, ever, ever, ever regret joining the United States Air Force. I didn't shoot off my foot, and I'm glad I didn't. It was in the Air Force that I learned discipline. It was in the Air Force that I learned things like duty, honor, courage, and self-sacrifice. It was in the Air Force that I learned that every American can have a chance. It was as an enlisted man in the Air Force that I learned what it meant to serve.

And best of all, it was in the Air that I found God in my life. It was in the Air Force that I met a chaplain who was willing to sit down with me and answer my questions and talk to me. It was in the Air Force I was able to find answers to questions like who am I, why am I here, what's the meaning of life, is life worth living, is life worth dying for, is there anything worth dying for? It was in the Air Force that I sat down with a chaplain and my life was transformed as he pointed me to the living God. I don't know even his name, I don't know his denomination, I don't know anything about him. He was a chaplain, he was an officer, the first officer I think I ever talked to, but he helped me -- by God's grace, that's what we as chaplains are all about. We want to help.

So I say to you this afternoon that America is the greatest, the freest, the most decent society in all existence. It's an oasis of goodness in the desert of cynicism and barbarism. It is an honor to serve America. It is an honor to wear the uniform. For those of us who wear it, it is the greatest honor in all the world to wear the insignia of a United States Air Force Chaplain.

God bless America, the land that we love. Stand beside her, oh Lord, and guide her through the night with the light from above. From the mountains to the prairies to the oceans white with foam. Oh, God, oh God, bless America, our home, our sweet home. Amen.

Do you have any questions? Criticisms, compliments?

Question: In the backup material here it alluded to there's a shortage of Roman Catholic chaplains. [Inaudible].

MajGen Richardson: Yes. It's more profound in the Army, although it's very severe in the chaplain community,

in the Army Chaplain Corps, and I don't want to diminish it in any way. We have a radical shortage.

I don't know how hard to pound the pulpit on that because generally in the military when we have a problem we just go out and fix it. The problem is, it's not our problem. Maybe that's not well said, but it's absolutely true. The problem belongs to the Roman Catholic Church. I can recruit a priest into the military, but I can't recruit a young man into the priesthood. The Roman Catholic Church is radically short of priests. There are only about 260 priests in all of America who are under age 30, and that's prime recruiting time.

We've had to waive everything we can possibly waive. We'll take priests in up to age 47 and beyond if we have to. We're trying to get cadets to be able to come directly into seminary from the Air Force Academy. We are doing every kind of waiver we can possibly issue. We're working on, it isn't approved yet, but we're working on maybe getting non-native Americans, non-card-carrying Americans to be able to come into the Reserves and that would put them on fast-track to citizenship. Once they become citizens we can bring them as priests into the military as priests.

We're working through the dioceses for new and creative ideas to be able to meet the needs of our people who are Roman Catholic. I have focused since I was a captain on the priest shortage, although not a priest. I have worked hard on that. I'm just about to the place where I will not give up working on recruiting more priests and we've increased our recruiting and we're doing a little bit better. But I realize that we're not going to solve the problem, we keep falling further and further and further behind. We won't solve the problem by increased recruiting. We've got to find some other ways of meeting the needs of the young person who says I'll support and defend the Constitution of the United States, and by the way, I'm a Roman Catholic.

How do we meet their needs? We used to say, oh we have a priest for you. Well, we don't have the priests. The Roman Catholic Church doesn't have the priests. And the bishops have to release them to us before we can recruit them, and the bishop's sitting out there with 15 churches empty. How can they release them to the military? They do, we have lots of them but nowhere close to as many as we want. We have 84 right now. We'd like to have 140. The Army has less than we do, and they're over twice our size. So yes, it's a radical problem.

The arch bishop for the military services, Arch Bishop Berlio, has been fabulous. He's working with us, he's helping us all he possibly can. The bishops for the military services are doing everything they possibly can to help us with recruiting. But you can't recruit somebody who doesn't exist. The average age of a priest is increasing every year and the number of priests is decreasing every year, so it's a big issue for us.

We'd love to recruit deacons, we'd love to recruit nuns, but the Catholic church has to give us permission to do that. They would have to release them. We don't have chaplains in the military who are not sponsored by a religious group. That would be a violation of the separation of church and state.

Does that answer your question?

Question: [Inaudible] as far as the non-natives [inaudible]?

MajGen Richardson: That's something we're looking into. It's a brainstorming thing. We're trying to do everything we possibly can to get more priests. Everything we possibly can do, because want to meet the needs of our people in uniform. About 23 percent of Air Force people are Roman Catholic. We feel a tremendous responsibility to provide for the free exercise of their faith. We want them to be able to stand up and come in as Roman Catholics and leave the service as a better Roman Catholic, having worshiped all the way and grown in their faith. That's what it's about.

Thank you. Good question.

Question: Two questions. One, I'm [inaudible]. Are you [inaudible] increase the number of Reserves [inaudible]? To your understanding, [inaudible] and the number [inaudible]. [Inaudible]? Are you finding the help you need in [inaudible] support for families [inaudible].

MajGen Richardson: It especially works well with the Guard, because the Guard tends to be tied into the community even more so. Reserve chaplains are a tremendous blessing to us. We're a little bit short of Reserve chaplains. We're way over in active duty chaplains. We need them. We need every one of them. I don't want to lose a one, but with the PBD-27 cuts we actually are overmanned and over a period of time, kind of a vectored glide path, we'll have to lose some.

The Reserves are, the Category B traditional Reserves, are basically providing backfill for us. With the priests, for instance, when a priest goes over, and our priests tend to deploy much more than say a Protestant does or the Rabbis, but when the priest goes over we'll try to get a backfill Reservist to cover. But they're very very short too, the Reserves are very short. They're helping us all they possibly can.

We have 18 bases right now that don't even have a priest at all, where we have to either have a caretaker Catholic program or a contract Catholic priest, and sometimes the contractors are very very old and all they can do is take care of mass. Well, that's important. In the Roman Catholic faith the center of the faith is the Eucharist, the communion. So that's critically important. But we would like to be able to hire a priest, not to in any way denigrate the work of those who are only saying mass, but we'd like to be able to hire a priest who will pull together the whole community and will be sort of a parish priest to the community, will work with the children in the education and will do weddings and baptisms and funerals and provide a full parish ministry. We can't always do that. They're just not there. And like I say, the Roman Catholic church is having the same problem, it's just we're reflecting their problem.

But recruiting is a little better, but it's because we've tripled our recruiting efforts. We've actually taken priests away from the communion table to go out and recruit, to go to the seminaries. We're doing all that we possibly can.

Did that answer your question? Maybe there's something --

Question: [Inaudible].

MajGen Richardson: We have, through local ministerial groups, generally the wing chaplain, the senior chaplain at the bases, works with the ministerial groups to come up with a disaster response plan and the chaplains often practice it so that they'll have a day without the chaplains, and they'll have either a retired clergyman or retired chaplain or a local clergyman come in and take over and say this is what we do should we have a disaster here at base.

The bases through the ministerial groups, local ministerial groups, do very very well at reaching out to waiting wives, waiting spouses. Churches are often very very enthusiastic about having special programs for the

children of the deployed. Some I've heard will even do free car repair through mechanics in their church for the people who are deployed, all those kinds of things. That's an ongoing thing throughout America in the stateside bases.

Chaplains tend to be very much involved in the local ministerial groups, and therefore they partner with the local clergy, civilian clergy. And of course every chaplain is from a specific denomination so you have immediate identity with the other clergy of that denomination, too.

Other questions?

Can I have an Amen?

[Amen].

We do have a question in the back.

Question: [Inaudible]

MajGen Richardson: Amen. I read that in a book somewhere.

Question: Thank you [inaudible].

MajGen Richardson: And they're all just amazed that they're actually there. Thank you for that, I appreciate that.

God bless you all.

[Applause].

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