

# Expeditionary Religious Ministry

It's time to take the Marine Corps' Religious Ministry Teams littorally

by LCDR Jeremy Blythe, CHC, USN & Maj Robert Boudreau, USMCR

**T**he Problem: Units in the Future Will Face Constrained Religious Ministry Resources

"Leaders must ensure Marines are well-led and cared for physically, emotionally and spiritually, both in and out of combat."<sup>1</sup> These words, spoken by the 38th Commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen David Berger, drive home the importance for commanders and leaders at all levels to ask critical questions about how to ensure the total fitness of their Marines and sailors will continue to be a top priority within an increasingly distributed force as the Marine Corps implements the bold vision for future operations laid out in *Force Design 2030*. How will the vital resources now available on most military bases continue to be accessible to a force that will be systematically disaggregated into smaller teams, dispersed across a large area of operations, each expected to persist independently, with limited communications, minimal logistical support, and while seeking to maintain a reduced footprint within the weapons engagement zone (WEZ)? How will service members receive adequate access to medical services, religious ministries, substance abuse counseling, and a host of other services currently available for the total fitness and resilience of the Marine and sailor?

One of the most important of these services is the free exercise of religion among service members deployed and serving overseas, which the Navy Chaplain Corps is sworn to uphold as its primary mission. Provision of religious services is a commander's responsibility. He owns this responsibility as carried

***"Forces conducting [Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO)] persist forward by moving with a high degree of flexibility within areas of key maritime terrain, presenting a light posture, sustaining themselves in an austere setting, and protecting themselves from detection and targeting. EABO diminish the reliance on fixed bases and easily targetable infrastructure."***

**—Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Based Operations**

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out through the Command Religious Program, and its execution is entrusted to the Chaplains assigned to their command.<sup>2</sup> Military Chaplains, charged by oath and ordination to ensure the religious needs of their Marines and sailors, must find ways to minister to those at the front lines of military engagements. Military lore is filled with stories of chaplains, no less military heroes in their own right, who have held worship services in the heat of battle. But those stories often come from stories of full-scale frontal assaults, such as the Battle of the Bulge during World War II. This battle burned through the latter half of December and most of January with no "Christmas Truce," yet there are ample

accounts from veterans who still managed to attend Chaplain-led Christmas services even as the battle raged, which greatly infused these warriors with hope and resolve to stay in the fight.

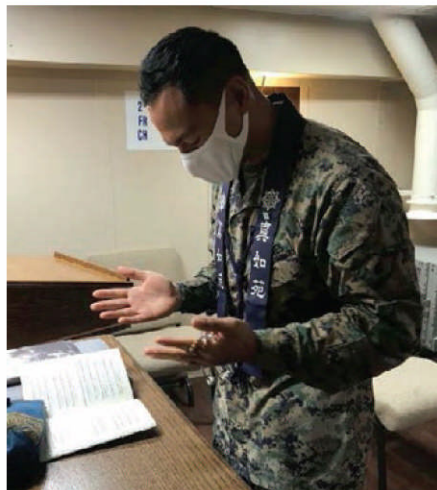
## The Current Religious Ministry Program Structure

In a Marine Corps infantry battalion, the table of organization calls for one Navy chaplain and one Navy enlisted religious program specialist (RP) who provides logistical support and coordination for religious programming as well as force protection to the Chaplain during combat. Together, the Chaplain and RP make up the core of a command's religious ministry team (RMT). An RMT



may be proactive in going forward and making meaningful connections with their deployed force, but they will be limited in their ability to meet the needs of units operating across the WEZ under the highly distributed, Expeditionary Advanced Based Operations (EABO) model, where significant distances between units of action will often put them out of travel range. How should RMTs adapt to this model in order to adequately fulfill the Commandant's charge to ensure Marines are cared for "both in and out of combat?"

The Navy's Religious Lay-Leader program (RLLP) holds the key for commanders and their Chaplains to expand their reach in providing religious services to forward-deployed service members. As mentioned above, a Chaplain and RP make up the core of an RMT, but in cases where a Chaplain is unavailable, or where Religious Needs Assessments (RNA)<sup>3</sup> have identified a faith group that exists within the command, which is different from the Chaplain's own faith, the RLLP allows for a volunteer from that faith to come forward and seek eligibility to meet that religious need.<sup>4</sup> The Navy's *Lay Leader Handbook* provides for the appointment of all Marines and sailors to serve as lay leaders to represent their faith group in this capacity once they have met all of the requirements for command appointment.<sup>5</sup> The *Handbook* provides guidance on the traits someone should possess before being considered for this position, counseling that "[t]he appointments should be based on volunteerism, high moral character, motivation, religious interest, and with the respective religious organization's (RO) authorization that the lay leader is qualified to deliver religious services."<sup>6</sup> Once it is clear that a service member embodies these traits, the process for becoming a certified lay leader is fairly simple. First, they are given a standardized interview by the command chaplain or, if there is no chaplain, the immediate superior in command chaplain. Second, their chain of command gives approval or disapproval. Third, the prospective lay leader's religious organization must officially authorize them to serve as a lay leader. This authorization usually comes in the form of a letter of recommenda-



**Capt Litthiddeth Phansiri, Buddhist Lay Leader for 31st MEU, delivers a traditional chant before service aboard USS America.**  
(Photo provided by author.)

tion. After the Chaplain has confirmed the appropriateness of the endorsement to conduct religious services, the chaplain or RP will provide RLLP Command Religious Program training with the candidate, which consists of four lessons on the responsibilities and limita-

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tions of lay leader service. Finally, upon successful completion of the training, the chaplain will route a recommendation to the commander for a letter of appointment.<sup>7</sup>

This appointment allows the lay leader to represent their faith by leading services and providing other opportunities for fellow members of their faith to grow spiritually. The appointment is also time-specific, usually during a deployment or operational period when other options for worship are harder to come by and is not to exceed a year.<sup>8</sup> This process for becoming a lay leader,

then, must be repeated each time a service member moves to a new command under the current requirements. With each move, a lay leader can learn the religious needs of the command by inquiring about RNAs, which are kept by the command's RMT. Then, if there is no available Chaplain endorsed by their particular religion, they can consider seeking an RLLP re-appointment.

### **Limitations to the RMT may lead to Ministry Shortfalls**

Lay leader appointments are best accomplished during a pre-deployment workup cycle. However, given the new environment envisioned in *Force Design 2030*, deploying units often may not have information as to where their deployments will lead or how they may be tasked to conduct EABO missions or otherwise be dispersed throughout an area of operations. As a result, one of the predicted shortfalls under this model is that RMTs preparing for deployment may not have access to the mobility and logistics needed to conduct adequate battle force circulation to provide religious services to all of the small units being ordered to execute distributed operations.

Gratefully, lay leaders, who are organic to the command, can close the gap in this shortfall. However, a second shortfall exists in the RLLP because, while it is unlikely that previously appointed lay leaders will become *unqualified* to serve with their commands, their ability to serve will lapse after the standard one-year appointment limitation or based on the likelihood that they could be moved under the authority of new leadership.

It stands to reason that most previously appointed lay leaders would embrace the opportunity to serve in the distributed environment inherent in the EABO setting, but in this new battlespace, it will be less likely that they will have access to an embedded RMT. Also, experience shows that lay leaders often do not seek an appointment with every new command, even though their qualifications likely remain the same. The process of seeking re-appointment as a lay leader at every command undoubtedly dissuades some otherwise available service members from continuing to serve,



due to time constraints, unfamiliarity with new leadership, and inability to see where gaps in meeting religious needs may arise in a deployed environment.

### Recommended Improvements to the RLLP

To address this shortfall, the Department of the Navy needs to consider two changes to the RLLP: first, previously appointed lay leaders should be permitted to serve with any new command, provided they give updated endorsements on a regular (perhaps annual, bi-, or triennial) basis; and second, the Chaplain Corps should maintain a means of tracking lay leaders' appointments across the force, so that qualified lay leaders can easily be identified to provide services to units dispersed throughout the WEZ.

The first change, allowing streamlined recertification to facilitate continued RLLP service, could follow the model that the Marine Corps uses to maintain judge advocates' certification under the Uniform Code of Military Justice. A Marine Administrative Message is published annually, directing that all judge advocates provide proof of bar membership and good standing to Headquarters Marines Corps Judge Advocate Division.<sup>9</sup> Judge advocates obtain appropriate paperwork from their respective state bars and send it to an organizational email address, where the receipt is acknowledged and appropriate follow-up actions, if any, are taken. Likewise, lay leaders could periodically (perhaps every three years, following a typical rotation to a new assignment) obtain updated endorsements from their religious organizations and submit them to the Chaplain Corps. As an alternative, periodic recertification could be required within a specific time window after checking in to a new unit, such as within 90 days of joining the new command.

The second, and more robust change, is to create and maintain a database that provides (1) lay leaders' names and rank; (2) their religious organization, along with the religious services that their particular institution allows them to provide; and (3) their current duty station. This database could be made available to RMTs serving across the FMF so that they could easily pinpoint who is available to provide religious services within



**Chaplain Blythe and RPSN Ezekiel Fernandez prepare to insert with the 31st MEU's Forward CE during a certification exercise. (Photo by author.)**



**Capt Danyiel Brustmeyer, Jewish Lay Leader for 31st MEU, blows the shofar aboard USS America during the Jewish month of Elul. 3. (Photo provided by author.)**

their commands' distributed forces. RMTs, now armed with a magazine of lay leaders ready to serve, will be able to facilitate religious ministry over a much broader area of operations and empower lay leaders to provide religious ministry at forward, remote outposts where physical access to an RMT is severely limited. Currently, when a lay leader's appointment expires and they move to a new command, it is often the case that the Chaplain Corps' awareness of that person as a valuable, potential resource becomes lost; however, because this

database would make information on lay leaders available until they end their service, it would generate a pool of likely candidates for an RMT to draw from that is not yet at their fingertips.

In a typical scenario, a battalion chaplain would be called to a staff planning meeting where the staff learns that two platoons will execute EABO missions and be inserted at two separate locations where the RMT cannot schedule visits. Thinking proactively, chaplains would refer to RNAs and ask, "What are the religious needs of Marines in those platoons?" Once identified, he would then ask, "Who within the battalion can serve those needs? The RNAs may indicate that a particular Marine within this faith group desires to serve as a lay leader, but assuming there is not enough time to get a lay leader appointed in this short-fused situation, a simple database query could provide the force multiplication needed at that moment by pinpointing a lay leader that is already trained and available to those Marines. "Great! Sgt Jones with Bravo Company 1st Platoon can provide a service for the upcoming Easter season, but 2nd Platoon doesn't have any lay leaders right now." Now, the chaplain has a decision point with several possible courses of action: should the battalion send him forward as an augment? Should the command seek out a new lay leader and try



to scramble through the command appointment process? Or should chaplains recommend that the battalion pull a lay leader from 3d Platoon to send to the field with 2d Platoon?

## Conclusion

EABO across the WEZ will inevitably disrupt not only the RMT's ability to ensure the free exercise of religion among the Marines and sailors entrusted to their care but may also curtail a host of other services currently accessible. Nevertheless, these disruptions can be greatly alleviated through streamlining the administrative process to ensure lay leaders are available at the greatest point of impact to be *where it matters, when it matters, and with what matters*. As the Marine Corps adapts to meet *Force Design 2030*, the faithful efforts of our Chaplain Corps should likewise adapt to build increased flexibility and reach into the RMT. As Marines persist at forward operating bases, their spiritual needs can

still be met through the RLLP as a valuable extension of our increasingly limited RMTs across the WEZ.

## Notes

1. Quoted in Headquarters Marine Corps, *Spiritual Fitness: Leader's Guide Notebook* (Washington, DC: February 2022).

2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCO 1730.6F, Religious Ministry in the Marine Corps* (Washington, DC: August 2018).

3. The Religious Needs Assessment is a standard assessment tool used by the RMT for all new check-ins to the command in order to assess the religious needs and sincerely held beliefs of all service members attached.

4. The *MILPERSMAN 1730-010/MARCORMAN* gives this warrant for lay leaders and gives parameters for the Religious Lay Leader Program.

5. Department of the Navy, *Navy Tactics Techniques and Procedures (NTTP) Publication 1-05* (Washington, DC: November 2016).

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. For example, see Headquarters Marine Corps, *MARADMIN 020/22, Certification of Good Standing with Attorney Licensing Authority* (Washington, DC: January 2022).



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