

Military Chaplains:

The View From on High and From Below

Story and photos by Margaret Bone



Lt Jeffrey Seiler, CHC, USNR, a former Marine, conducted a worship service in the 2d Tank Bn from a field altar. Chaplains serving in the Fleet Marine Force, of necessity, become great improvisors.

It's less of heaven and hell than it is of aviation and ground troops, more of family problems and counseling than the results of "incoming" and other attacks. It's scheduling religious services in the field or garrison, and it's about looking after the morale and spiritual well-being of United States Marines. Navy chaplains are men and women of the cloth, who minister to the nation's warriors in a variety of ways, and it works.

At last count, 270 of the Navy's 1,054 chaplains were assigned to the Marine Corps. Eleven of 62 female chaplains in the Navy serve with the Marines. The great majority volunteer to serve with the Corps. It's regarded as an honor.

Just as Navy corpsmen and physicians take care of the Marine Corps' medical needs, Navy chaplains address spiritual needs. It's a relationship that has existed since November 1775, when the Chaplain Corps, like the Marine

Corps, was born.

Yet unlike medical care, spiritual care is essentially an option. Those who deliver it can only offer; they don't order. Chaplains deal in words, thoughts and philosophies instead of penicillin, splints and quarantines.

Much has happened since 1775 to fine-tune that special relationship, but the focus has remained constant—to provide a religious ministry for those in military service who desire it.

The image of a chaplain administering last rites in a foxhole isn't totally out of date, but a more current, accurate portrayal would be that of the chaplain counseling a tearful young wife or a distraught Marine.

As the population of military dependents has grown, so has the need for counseling and pastoral care. Throughout its history, the Chaplain Corps has adapted to change, responding to the very specific needs of Marines.

Deployment brings its own particular set of stressors to family life, and a Marine who is stressed about things "back home" will have trouble concentrating 100 percent on the task at hand.

Two things occurred during the 1980s that have affected the way chaplains go about their business—one was the increasing number of military dependents, and the other was the lesson of Beirut.

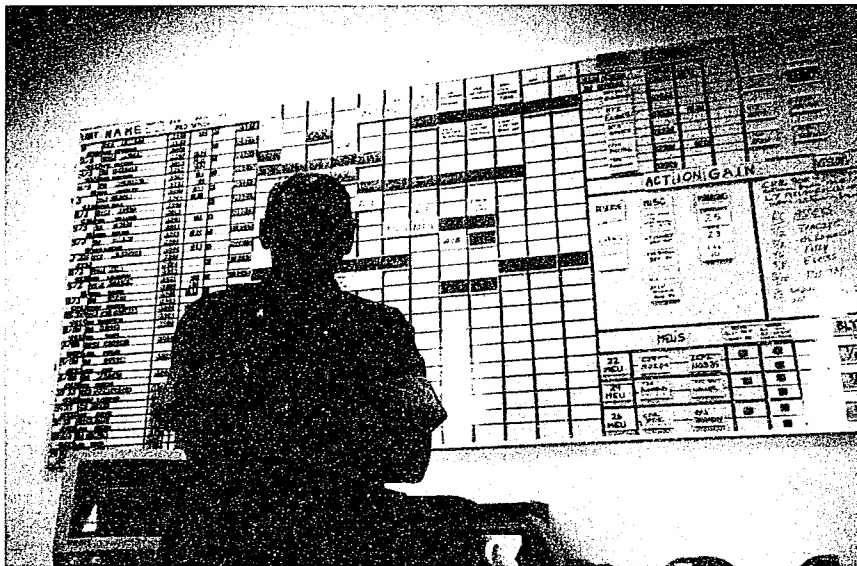
"In a military environment, in peacetime, singles become lonely; it's a driving force. During recruit training, they are surrounded by the group, then they become a Marine or a Sailor. Many respond by getting married. There are many JP (justice of the peace) weddings, and that means bypassing the premarriage counseling a religious ceremony requires. With the JP, they just get it over with and do it. Frustration and stress levels develop much more quickly. There are more and more marriages within the military, and the rates of both marriage and divorce are rising," said Captain Richard Gates, CHC, USN, Second Marine Division Chaplain, Camp Lejeune, N.C.

Chaplain Gates brings a unique perspective to his duty. He's a former Marine, who commanded an infantry platoon during the Vietnam War. Now serving his fifth tour with the Marine Corps as a chaplain, he well understands the demands and rewards of a military life.

"My primary concern when counseling is to look for a dysfunctional family background. Very few will come right out with a religious need to be met; they will mention something else first. I may ask about their religious background, how they were raised, what their values are. It's harder to reach those with no traditional sense of spiritual values, who have never relied on an organized church concept," said Chaplain Gates.

As division chaplain, he is in charge of 24 chaplains who work within the 2dMarDiv. Even with the administrative load, he still sees himself first and foremost as a pastor who meets the needs of those around him, and that includes counseling. "It is important for everyone to have a 'trusted person' in their life," he said. A chaplain can often fill that role.

Lieutenant Jeffrey Seiler, CHC, USNR, chaplain for the 2d Tank Battalion at Camp Lejeune, was an enlisted Marine before becoming an Episcopal priest and joining the Navy. He said, "Counseling forms the great bulk of my work. I have an average of 80 counseling sessions a month. If you count the informal, on-site visitations, the number



Above: Capt Richard Gates, CHC, USN, another former Marine, is chaplain for the Second Marine Division. He is serving his fifth tour with the Marine Corps.

is larger.

"The counseling load reflects a variety of stresses: stress due to the draw-down or to the difficulty of promotion in the tank community or of not being able to reenlist.

"Probably 80 percent of my counseling is crisis or near crisis, and 20 percent is crisis prevention."

In addition to counseling, chaplains conduct weekly worship services, lead Bible study and observe special holy days as appropriate. They conduct funeral and memorial services, work closely with family readiness officers, and like the Marines they serve, are ready for immediate deployment.

Navy chaplains must have a master's degree or 90 credit hours of graduate work before they are assigned. Some have special training in specific areas, like alcohol and substance abuse, marriage counseling, family enrichment, bioethics and single parenting. The list is as long as the needs are.

Each chaplain is associated with an established faith, but will function in an ecumenical setting whenever it's needed. It's needed frequently—the Department of Defense recognizes 230 faith groups.

Chaplain Gates explained, "Chaplains are based on organized religious denominations." But the great diversity of needs found in the Marine Corps means that some services remain ecumenical.

Beirut, Oct. 23, 1983. In one cata-



Readying the chapel for worship services is but one duty for Senior Chief Anthony Evangelista, USN, a religious program specialist or RP.

clysmic moment, a bomb shattered the battalion landing team headquarters, and more than 240 Marines, Sailors and Soldiers were killed. The consequences of that terrible event sent shock waves through the military, and through the government that placed them there, and through the chaplaincy that suddenly had to deal with mass casualties in combat conditions. Oct. 23, 1983, was pivotal.

"Never, through all the wars, did we have a written program for training new chaplains in combat situations. After Beirut, we developed a concept of ministry in a combat environment," said Chaplain Gates. "We have that training now."

"Combat gets down to the ultimate meaning of life, and chaplains can help

by a 'ministry of presence,' to communicate the peace of God," said Chaplain Seiler. "We can bring sacraments and prayer to the combat lines. We don't just deal with casualties."

Capt George Pucciarelli, CHC, USN, Chaplain, Marine Forces, Atlantic, was in Beirut. He has written, "The most crucial concern of our vocation is combat and crisis ministry.... When we go to war, when we experience crisis, when we are summoned to the scene of tragedy, we are the one person who is expected, in fact *called* to be the spiritual and emotional backbone of the command.... We are the messengers of compassion; we are the ones who must invoke the confidence in God's grace."

These men and women of the clergy are ready to deploy and deliver their specialties anywhere on the globe, at a moment's notice. Mount-out readiness includes such items as field altars, communion kits, recorded music and ecclesiastical gear. While their material isn't exactly lethal stuff, it's planned as strategically as the gear of any recon team.

Serving alongside chaplains are the RPs. Since 1976, there has been formal training for religious program specialists at Meridian, Miss. RPs are alternately described as administrative staff and "bullet catchers." They are bodyguards for the noncombatant clergy during combat, and office staff during peacetime.

Duties require merging a love of humanity with an ability to defend humanity, when necessary. Many RPs go through Marine Combat Training, and some enlisted Marines, with the MOS 0151, are active in the program.

Senior Chief Anthony Evangelista, USN, from Hazelton, Pa., is at Camp Lejeune. It's his second tour with the Marine Corps. He's an RP. "We must have a very pluralistic mind-set. We must provide opportunities for all faiths to worship." That means if someone's religion requires that he stand on his head every Wednesday for an hour, the RPs will provide a place for it to be done.

"The role of the chaplain is to preach, teach and counsel. We fill the logistic and administrative roles," continued Chief Evangelista. "They administer the sacraments; we provide them. At the same time, we're expected to live a lifestyle which properly reflects the Chaplain Corps image.

"Chaplains are noncombatants, and we are basic riflemen. When we sign up, saying we'll serve in FMF, we definitely are on the 'green side.'"

RP3 Andre Haynes, USN, is at Camp Lejeune. He's a self-described nonde-

nominal Christian, who volunteered for the RP program. "I liked the idea of protecting the chaplains and serving with the Marines. It's more about helping people out than it is about religion," he said.

Three years ago, the Chaplain of the Marine Corps, Capt D. L. Krabbe, CHC, USN, conducted a survey of Marine officers. The questionnaire, blessed by the Commandant, was designed to identify qualities that Marine commanders look for in their chaplains.

Most important? Being a moral leader by example. Next? Being present with Marines, sharing hardships in the field. The third was being a wise counselor. The remaining 20 qualities included everything from physical fitness to understanding the unit's mission.

Lt Dorries Sue Byers, CHC, USNR, 2d Assault Amphibian Bn, Camp Lejeune, is one of less than a dozen female chaplains assigned to the Marine Corps. She volunteered. "I find that when I'm living in the field, sharing the field experience, they appreciate it. In counseling, there may be some initial hesitancy if the problems are 'male-female,' but Marines like having a female perspective."

Chaplain Byers, although an ordained minister, can function in that role only in the military. "Southern Baptists do not allow women in the pulpit." While that's a fairly sobering circumstance, she will also tell you with a sparkle in the eye, "I'm like a mother of boys with real expensive toys."

Of all the armed services, Marines deploy the largest percentage of their forces. They are called upon more frequently, to perform more tasks, than any other branch service. Congress has not changed its mandate to the Corps which is "to be a national force in readiness"; it has only cut the budget. The pressure is on.

If you believe the law of physics which says for every action there is an opposite and equal reaction, then tracing stress in the Marine's workplace and life is easy.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that dealing with stress, whether in combat, counseling or casualty situations, is helped by the closeness of a "trusted person," as Capt Gates said.

Marines are as blessed by the Navy Chaplain Corps as the chaplains are blessed by the grace of God.



Above: RP3 Andre Haynes, USN, inventoried the contents of a Chaplain's Combat Assault Kit. The kit contains everything needed for a field altar which may be the back of a Humvee or stacked MRE boxes.

Below: RPs protect and assist chaplains in the field and in garrison. Many go through Marine Combat Training.

