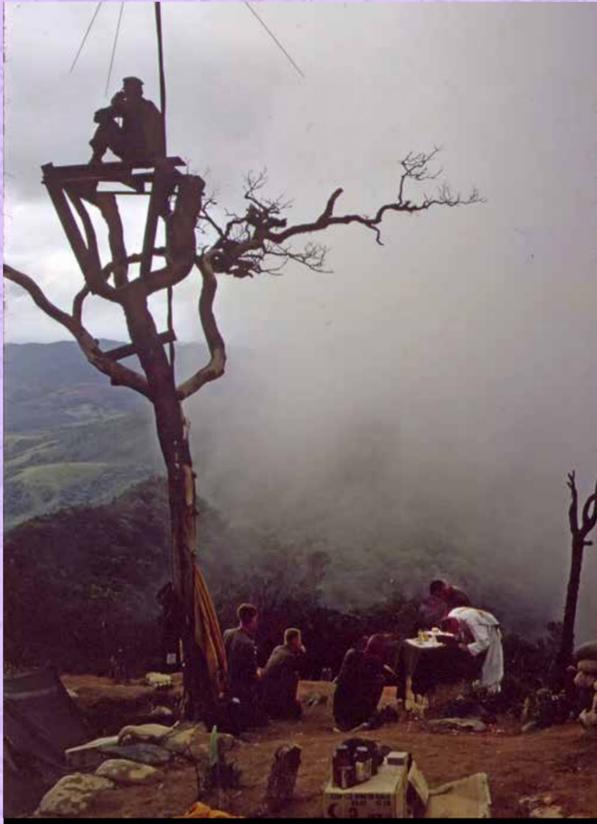




THE CHAPLAINCY IN THE VIETNAM WAR

(PART 1 OF 3)



A U.S. Marine stands watch from a crude observation tower as a chaplain holds mass on Hill 950, July 31, 1967. Hill 950 was one of four hills surrounding the Khe Sanh combat base. (Official Navy photo)

Introduction

The presence of chaplains in Vietnam increased as American troop strength grew. By war's end, nearly 3,000 chaplains from the Army, Navy, and Air Force served in Vietnam, each chaplain with a vastly different experience of the war, but a shared commitment to minister where they were needed.

Although the term chaplain originally had Christian roots, the U.S. military used it to describe all professionals specially trained to serve any spiritual need, regardless of religious affiliation. In addition to offering pastoral care to individuals, and supporting their religious rights and needs, military chaplains also advised military commanders on issues of religion, ethics, morale, and morals as affected by religion.

In the U.S. military, chaplains in the Army, Navy, and Air Force served all services. Navy chaplains ministered to Marines and Coast Guardsmen, as well as Sailors.

The primary mission of the chaplains in Vietnam was to serve the religious needs of all American troops, regardless of rank, duty assignments, or physical locations. Chaplains, therefore, regularly traveled by any means possible to meet troops where they served – at sea, in the jungles, on remote bases, and atop high mountain firebases. Most chaplains were assigned to cover large areas, often with bases in their areas of responsibility spaced hundreds of miles apart. Traveling mostly by jeep and helicopters, chaplains often coordinated their efforts with local organizations, visiting local hospitals and orphanages, too.

Jewish Chaplains

At first it was believed that two U.S. Army Jewish chaplains would suffice; however, in December 1967, because of the overall increase in U.S. military personnel in the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), a third Jewish chaplain was sent to Vietnam. This short-staff situation continued until late 1968, when only three Jewish chaplains, two Army and one Air Force, covered the entire country. Another Jewish chaplain was added later.

Since there were fewer Jewish chaplains in the country, they were posted to central locations, such as Saigon or Long Binh, and they were assigned larger geographical areas to which they provided religious support.

Most Jewish chaplains favored organizing larger services to observe the High Holy Days (Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur) and other important religious observances (for example, Passover, Sukkoth, Chanukah, and Purim), rather than conduct many small or individual field services.

Stateside organizations were helpful resources for deployed chaplains. The Jewish Welfare League actively supported Jewish chaplains by sending difficult to procure materials, such as prayer books, education materials, and even kosher foods or matza and wine for a Passover Seder. The Commission on Jewish Chaplains created a set of "procedure guides" in 1970 to assist chaplains of all faiths to better serve Jewish personnel by offering outlines of suggested activities to accommodate the Jewish faithful.

Most Jewish chaplains that served in Vietnam were assigned to the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) headquarters and were tasked to support units or geographic areas from there.

Army

Many Army chaplains amassed hundreds of hours of flight time during a one-year tour "in-country." They maintained weekly circuits, on a routine schedule as weather permitted, visiting multiple locations. Most chaplains were undaunted by the dangers of combat, often keeping to their routines to deliver mass, fellowship, communion, and hear confessions, even when units were engaged in ongoing offensive or defensive operations.

At any given time during the war, Army chaplains outnumbered Air Force and Navy chaplains in Vietnam by at least two to one, and in early and later years, the imbalance was greater.

Navy

For the Navy chaplains that served in Vietnam very little was standard or predictable. Navy chaplains served ashore and at sea. Navy chaplains found themselves assigned to Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard commands, and they ministered to servicemen and women of all services. Ashore, chaplains ministered as they were able; anywhere, from pulpits in chapels constructed by Navy Seabees, in hospitals, or in the open air using makeshift altars. Navy chaplains assigned ashore to MACV accounted for roughly 44 percent of the naval chaplain billets in Vietnam. Nearly 20 percent of the Navy chaplains in Vietnam were assigned to aircraft carriers, and they circulated among the Navy, Coast Guard, and allied ships at sea daily, serving as many as 40-45 ships in a battle group or task force. At sea, Navy chaplains moved from ship to ship by means of helicopter, motor launch, or highline transfer. A primary task for chaplains at sea was to conduct memorial services for those pilots and crewmen killed in action. It was not uncommon for many ship-based chaplains to be detailed to smaller task groups for short periods to fill urgent needs or to fill a void left by tragedy.

"One of my challenges was convincing religious kids, Catholic kids, there is no opposition to their presence in the Army or even in combat, and to their lives as Catholics."

— Chaplain James D. Johnson, U.S. Army



Allied nations' chaplains served in Vietnam. Like their American counterparts, Australian chaplains used helicopters to circulate among their dispersed congregations. A Presbyterian, Bruce Roy was chaplain to Australian and New Zealand troops serving in Vietnam. January 1971. (Courtesy of Australian War Museum)

Approximately 8,000 Coastguardsmen served in Vietnam between 1965 and 1975. From 1967-1971, three U.S. Navy chaplains were assigned to "sea duty" aboard the Coast Guard's high endurance cutters participating in Operation MARKET TIME. With the Coast Guard, the chaplain normally spent about one week aboard each of the five cutters before returning to Squadron Three's headquarters in Subic Bay to begin the next circuit.

Air Force

The Air Force's archival record for the period between 1960-1967 is fragmentary, at best. In this period, the preponderance of Air Force chaplaincy records relate to its stateside programs, and secondarily on its efforts in Europe and Korea. Very little historic record exists about Air Force chaplains in Vietnam.



U.S. Navy chaplains ministered to the 8,000 U.S. Coast Guardsmen that served in Vietnam. An all-denominational religious service on board the 82-foot U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Point Comfort at Cat Lo, South Vietnam, Thanksgiving 1968. Approximately 30 Coast Guardsmen from the USCG's repair facility and four patrol boats attended the 45-minute service held by a Navy chaplain. (Official U.S. Coast Guard photo)

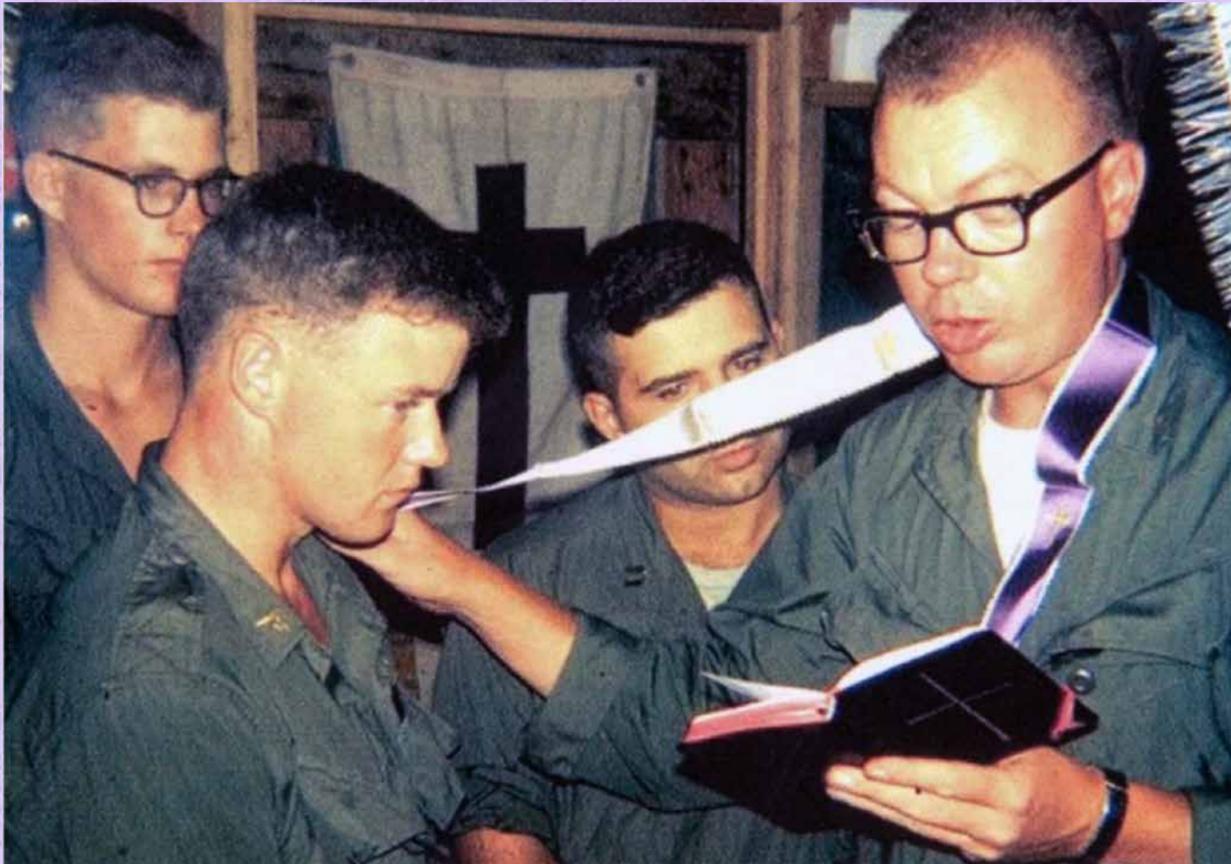
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Navy chaplain (Lieutenant) Robert R. Brett holding mass in a bunker in Vietnam, 1968. Brett was a Roman Catholic priest from Washington, D.C. During the siege at Khe Sanh, security, space, and staff restrictions prohibited military personnel from gathering in large groups, so Father Brett circulated to celebrate with as many as ten small masses per day under tense circumstances. He was 32 years old when he was killed in a rocket attack, along with his aide U.S. Marine Corps Private First Class Alexander Chin, in a bunker by the airstrip on February 22, 1968. (Wall of Faces, Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund)

Heroes and Sacrifice

Priests, ministers, and rabbis alike, went above and beyond the call of duty. Three chaplains earned the Medal of Honor, the Nation's highest military award for heroism.

There are 16 members of the clergy memorialized on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial – seven Catholic, seven Protestant, and two Jewish. All were men. Twelve were Army and four were Navy. Two were immigrants. Most were white, one was African American, and one was Filipino.



Don L. Bartley was a United Presbyterian Church minister. He had served in the Army for eight years when he was killed by a mine that destroyed the truck in which he was riding to conduct field services on June 8, 1969. The Navy newsmen were filming the final episode of a six-part series on the activities of military chaplains in Vietnam. The segment, entitled "The Circuit-Rider," was designed to show chaplains working close to Soldiers in combat. (Wall of Faces, Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund)

The first chaplain to die in Vietnam was also the first rabbi to serve there. Born in Israel, Captain Meir Engel emigrated to the United States in 1937. The rabbi was a 20-year Army veteran of WWII and Korea, and a 50-year-old lieutenant colonel when he arrived in Vietnam in the summer of 1964. He conducted services in Saigon each Friday night and spent the rest of the week in the field with the American advisers. He also served as the U.S. military's liaison to Buddhist religious officials as they set up a chaplaincy within the South Vietnamese Army. He died of a heart attack in the U.S. Naval Hospital in Saigon on December 16, 1964.

The first chaplain to be killed in action in Vietnam was Roman Catholic priest, Army Major William J. Barragy. He and 19 others died in a CH-47 helicopter crash on May 4, 1966. He was en route to provide religious services in the field to men of the 101st Airborne Division.

Two chaplains died on October 26, 1966, in unrelated incidents. William N. Feaster was a 28-year-old minister with the Congregational Christian Church and an Army captain. He had been in Vietnam for just over two months when the unit which he had joined on patrol was hit by friendly artillery fire on September 18, 1966. Chaplain Feaster died several weeks later from infection associated with his wounds.

William J. Garrity, Jr. was a 40-year-old Navy lieutenant and Roman Catholic priest aboard the aircraft carrier USS *Oriskany* (CVA-34). He was a 14-year Navy veteran when he was overwhelmed by smoke and heat and died while assisting wounded Sailors injured by a fire that broke out in the ship's hanger bay on October 26, 1966. Before the fires were completely under control, 44 Sailors died (43 from asphyxiation and one from burns) and 156 others were injured.

Michael J. Quealy, a Roman Catholic priest, was 37 years old when he was killed by small arms fire during an intense battle with a North Vietnamese Army regiment. Quealy was killed while providing comfort and giving last rites to wounded Soldiers near Saigon on November 8, 1966. In his five months in Vietnam, he ministered to troops in combat during Operation EL PASO, Operation SHENANDOAH, and finally, Operation ATTLEBORO. An Army press release remarked, "For him, the battle of November 8 differed only in the way it ended."

James J. L. Johnson was a 33-year-old African American Baptist pastor, and a captain with eight years of Army service. Assigned to 3d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, he had been in Vietnam for six months when he died with 27 others when the Navy VC-47 aircraft he was in lost a wing in flight due to structural overload.

Ambrosio S. Grandea, a Methodist minister, was born in the Philippines. Reverend Grandea emigrated to the U.S. with his family after World War II. A 34-year-old Army major with six years of service, he had been in Vietnam for more than six months when he was wounded by shrapnel from a booby trap in May 1967. He died several weeks later in an Air Force hospital as a result of infection from his wounds. He was posthumously awarded the Silver Star for heroism and inspirational actions assisting medics while on a search and destroy mission a few weeks before he was mortally wounded.

Vincent R. Capodanno was a Catholic priest and Maryknoll Missioner. He was 38 years old when he was killed during Operation SWIFT by small arms fire on September 4, 1967, while recovering and attending to the wounded during an intense battle. For his actions that day, he was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.

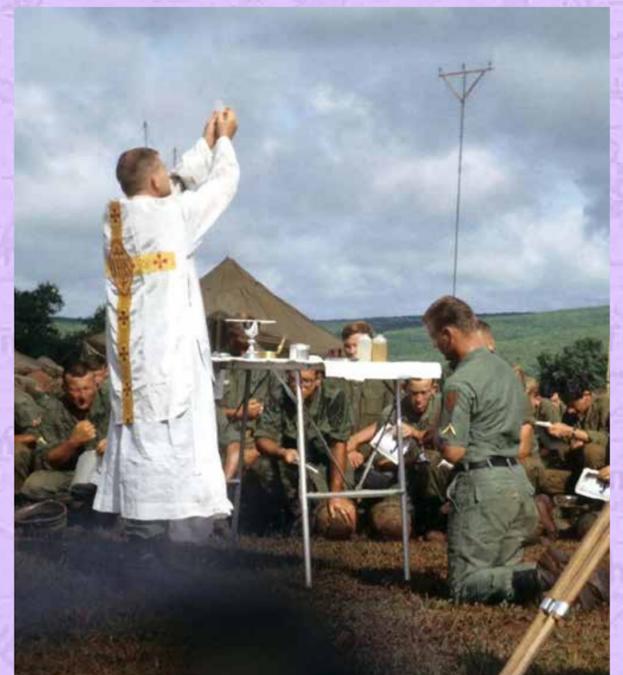
Charles J. Watters was a Roman Catholic priest. An Airborne-qualified Army major, he was 40 years old and had served in the Army for more than four years when he was killed in action while assisting medics and providing spiritual comfort and last rites during an assault on Hill 875 during Operation MACARTHUR on November 19, 1967. Father Watters was credited with recovering 20 wounded men under intense enemy directed small arms and machine gun fire. For his actions he was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.

Aloysius P. McGonigal was a Jesuit priest. An Army major with ten years of service, he had voluntarily extended his tour in Vietnam when he was killed by small arms fire during the Battle of Hue. He was shot and killed while comforting and giving last rites to wounded Marines as the unit conducted the final assault on the Citadel at Hue during the Tet Offensive on February 17, 1968.

Morton H. Singer was a Jewish rabbi. As a 32-year-old Army captain assigned to XXIV Corps, he was in Vietnam just five weeks when he died in a C-123 crash after take-off on his way to perform Chanukah services on December 17, 1968.

Roger W. Heinz was a 33-year-old Lutheran minister, and an Army major with ten years of service. Four months into his assignment in Vietnam, he was killed in action along with four other American Soldiers in a helicopter crash on December 9, 1969.

Phillip A. Nichols was a minister with the Assemblies of God. An Army captain, the 28-year-old guitar playing chaplain is fondly remembered for ensuring Soldiers got the opportunity to sing Amazing Grace out in the bush. Reverend Nichols died as a result of shrapnel wounds, along with eight other Soldiers, when one of the men tripped an enemy booby trap in the field on October 13, 1970. He was posthumously awarded the Bronze Star, Purple Heart, and the Air Medal.



Father Michael Quealy prepares the Eucharist in Vietnam on August 7, 1966. He was killed in action just three months later. (Photo from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund)

Army Captain Angelo Liteky, a Roman Catholic priest, was the third chaplain awarded the Medal of Honor in Vietnam. Unlike the others, his award was not posthumous. In November 1967, Father Liteky saved the lives of 23 wounded men - he personally carried more than 20 of them to the landing zone for evacuation during savage fighting.

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How Vietnam Changed the Chaplain's Role

Until the Civil War, U.S. law only permitted chaplains who were Christian ministers – Catholic and Protestant. After Jewish leaders petitioned Abraham Lincoln, Congress passed a law in 1862 permitting chaplains of any faith. In Vietnam, only Christian and Jewish chaplains were serving in the military. Chaplains have always served troops of all faiths, regardless of their own denomination.

As the Vietnam War progressed the Army expected more of chaplains. Army doctrine changed to ensure chaplains knew their role included coordinating civil-military operations with indigenous peoples, even though they may not have been familiar with the specific culture. The Army's 1967 Field Manual for Chaplains, FM 16-5, added, "The expert on indigenous religions is the religious relations officer (RRO) assigned within the civil affairs structure. Though the unit chaplain will not normally be an expert on these matters in a given area of operations, he will, owing to his position, be consulted by the commander and staff of his own organization. He is, therefore, expected to participate in civil-military operations staff coordination. This function should not detract from the primary direct support mission of unit/organization chaplain operations."



First Muslim Chaplain. Chaplain (Lieutenant Colonel) Abdul-Rasheed Muhammad, at left leading a religious service in the field, was the first Muslim chaplain commissioned in the U.S. Military in December 1993. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Army Chaplain Corps)

As the Army reliance on airmobile units grew, the 1967 Chaplain Field Manual was changed to ensure "additional chaplains are assigned within the airmobile division to provide coverage for added aviation and aviation maintenance units."

Women Chaplains

No female chaplains served in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War, but women were admitted to each of the service Chaplain Corps before the war in Vietnam ended. The Navy was the first service in the Department of Defense to commission a female chaplain. Dianna Pohlman Bell was sworn in as a lieutenant junior grade in July 1973.



First Hindu Chaplain. Chaplain (Captain) Pratima Dharm became the military's first Hindu chaplain in May 2011. (Official U.S. Army portrait)



First female chaplain in the DoD. In July 1973, Dianna Pohlman Bell was sworn in as a lieutenant junior grade. (Official U.S. Navy photo)

The Air Force and Army followed suit. The Air Force commissioned chaplain Lorraine K. Potter as a first lieutenant in September 1973. The Army commissioned Reverend Alice M. Henderson as a captain in its Chaplain Corps in July 1974.

Buddhist

By 1987, the Department of Defense officially recognized Buddhist Churches of America as the first group other than those within the Judeo-Christian tradition to endorse chaplains for Army service. It was another seven years, though, before their first chaplain was commissioned. The Navy commissioned the U.S. military's first Buddhist chaplain in July 2004, Lieutenant Junior Grade Jeanette Gracie Shin.



Army Buddhist Chaplain Captain Christopher Mohr holds a religious service while in the field at Fort Riley, Kansas in 2017. At the time, he was one of three Buddhist chaplains in the Army. (Official U.S. Army photo)

Muslim

Following the First Gulf War, Imam Abdul-Rasheed Muhammad, the first Muslim chaplain in the U.S. military, was sworn into service in December 1993. He was also the first chaplain to represent a non-Judeo-Christian faith group. The Department of Defense was responding to increasing numbers of Muslims enlisting in the military or converting to the religion in the ranks. To commission a Muslim chaplain, the military had to first approve a Muslim organization to vouch for the chaplain's credentials, a tricky proposition because in Islam there is no centralized, hierarchical religious structure.



First Lieutenant Saleha Jabeen (right), a native of India, the U.S. military's first female Muslim chaplain, posed with Major General Steven Schaik, Air Force chief of chaplains, at her graduation from the Air Force Basic Chaplain Course in February 2021. (Official U.S. Air Force photo)

His swearing-in followed ten years of negotiations between military leaders and representatives of the American Islamic community. The American Muslim Council, based in Washington, D.C., was chosen as accrediting agent. The first female Muslim chaplain was India-born U.S. Air Force Second Lieutenant Saleha Jabeen, in December 2019.

The prevailing spirit of chaplains across the military is exemplified in the words of Chaplain Saleha Jabeen, "I did not have to compromise on any of my religious beliefs or convictions. I am surrounded with people who respect me and are willing to receive what I bring to the table as a woman, a faith leader, and an immigrant. I am provided with numerous opportunities to learn and develop skills that best equip me to be a successful officer and a chaplain in a pluralistic environment. I get to provide spiritual care to all service members, guardians and families and advise the commanders on religious and moral matters regardless of my faith, ethnicity or gender."

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