Surviving Between the Wars: The U.S. Army Chaplaincy, 1919-1939

William J. Hourihan

Commenting on the state of the American Army in the early 1930's, General Douglas MacArthur observed that the "lack of officers has brought Regular Army training in the United States to a virtual standstill."[1] Between the wholesale demobilization which occurred after World War I, the continuous series of reductions which took place during the 1920's, and the effect of the Great Depression in the 1930's, the Army in this period, according to Russell T. Weigley, "may have been less ready to function as a fighting force than at any time in its history."[2] This pattern of creating a force of citizen soldiers to fight a war, and then quickly disbanding it after the need passed had held true throughout American history, an it was no different after 1918. As of 30 June 1919, 2,608,218 enlisted men, and 128,430 officers had received their discharges. By 1921, Congress had reduced the Regular Army to 150,000. The next year saw a further reduction to 137,000, and by 1927 the size of the Army stood at 118,750.[3] Fed by isolationism and reaction a against war, the American public saw little need for an effective military.

Dr. William J. Hourihan is the US Army Chaplain Branch Historian assigned to the US Army Chaplain Center and School, Fort Monmouth, NJ. He holds the Ph.D. from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and is a faculty member of Monmouth College, West Long Branch, where he teaches Military History. He is a frequent contributor to the Military Chaplains' Review and other publications.

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[1]Quoted in C. Joseph Bernardo and Eugene H. Bacon, *American Military Policy: Its Development Since 1775* (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole, 1955), 388.

[2]Russell F. Weigley, *History of the United States Army* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), 402.

[3]Ibid., 396, 401.

The Dark Years

All of this impacted upon the smallest branch in the Army, the Chaplaincy. Within six months after the Armistice, the number of chaplains on active duty went from 2,363 to 1,200. By 1920, only 125 chaplains remained in the Regular Army, and the number would stay at approximately that level until the late thirties. This state of affairs was not new to the Chaplaincy. Between the end of the Revolution in 1783 and 1791, for example, there were no chaplains in the American military; and from 1818 to 1838, there was just one chaplain in the entire Regular Army. As late as 1898, the number of chaplains on active duty stood at only 34.[4] When asked after the French Revolution what he had done during the Reign of Terror, the Abbé Sieyés replied, "J'ai vecu" ("I survived").[5] The same observation could be made in relation to the U.S. Army Chaplain Corps between the wars. Not only did it survive, however, but for the first time in its history the Chaplaincy emerged as an organized branch of the Army, grew professionally, and managed to develop a functional, well-trained cadre, which allowed it to meet the demands which would be placed upon it during World War II.

The most positive feature of these dark years for the Army can be found in the National Defense Act of 4 June 1920. This piece of legislation reorganized the Army and essentially served as the basis of Army organization until World War II and beyond. Even though the goals of the Act were, to a large extent, emasculated by a government which "gave them lip service but little practical support,"[6] the Act did bolster the Root reforms which had been introduced in the Army at the turn of the century, particularly in the areas of planning and command. For the Chaplaincy the most important feature of the Act was a provision which provided that:

> One chaplain, of rank not below that of major, may be appointed by the President, by and with consent of the Senate, to be chief of chaplains. He shall serve as such for four years, and shall have rank, pay and allowances of colonel while so serving.[7]

Thus, after 145 years of service to the Army and the nation, the Chaplaincy became a branch with its own organization.

First Chief of Chaplains

The chaplain chosen to be the first Chief of Chaplains was John Thomas Axton, a Congregationalist. He had been a chaplain since 1902, and his "administrative ability and excellent reputation made his selection and confirmation a good

[4]Robert L. Gushwa, *The Best and Worst of Times: The United States Army Chaplaincy, 1920-1945* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Chaplains, 1977), 3; Roy J. Honeywell, *Chaplains of the United States Army* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Chaplains, 1958), 75-7, 79, 159.

[5]Quoted in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, XX (Chicago, IL: 1972), 493.

[6]Weigley, *History of the U.S. Army*, 400.

[7]Quoted in Gushwa, *The Best and Worst*, 8.

choice."[8] He began his duties as Chief of Chaplains on 15 June 1920, with an office consisting of three chaplains, three Army field clerks, and several civilian employees loaned by the Adjutant General. Axton was reappointed as Chief in 1924 and served a second four-year term.[9] Robert L. Gushwa in *The Best and Worst of Times: The U.S. Army Chaplaincy, 1920-1945*, wrote that:

> During the eight years as Chief, Axton, an articulate spokesman in his Senate committee appearances and staff writings, established the Office of the Chief of Chaplains, fought the battles to have the insignia of grade returned to the chaplain's uniform, and to increase the size of the chaplain branch, presided over the significant growth in number of chaplains in the Officers' Reserve Corps, and initiated the practice of visits to the field by the Chief.[10]

Chaplain Axton was succeeded by Chaplain Edmund P. Esterbrook, a member of the Methodist Episcopal Church. A native of Devon in England, Esterbrook came to the United States in his late teens and attended Drew Theological Seminary, New Jersey. He served as a chaplain with New York volunteer units in the Spanish-American War, and he received an appointment as a chaplain in the Regular Army in 1900. By the end of the World War I, he was the senior chaplain of the A.E.F. (American Expeditionary Force) in France. Chaplain Esterbrook served as Chief from 7 April 1928, to 28 December 1929, when he retired for reasons of health and age. Chaplain Julian E. Yates was appointed to replace him and served a full four year term as Chief. Chaplain Yates, a native of North Carolina, was a member of the Baptist Church of the North. Educated at Wake Forest and the University of Chicago, he had been a chaplain since 1902. In 1933, he was followed by Chaplain Alva J. Brasted, who was Chief until 1937. Chaplain Brasted was a much beloved figure in the Chaplaincy. A Baptist, he was born in New York, graduated from Des Moines College, and during World War I he served on the Western Front as the chaplain of the 8th Infantry Regiment. A noted lecturer, he came out of retirement in World War II to return to active duty.[11]

Chaplains as Professionals

Although a small branch,the Chaplaincy firmly established itself in the 1920's. The Chaplain School, which was created in 1918, and which had been deactivated after the war, was re-established in 1920. Chaplain training became a prime factor in the professionalization of the branch. Since seminaries transformed individuals into clergy, it was up to the Army to take these civilian professionals and turn them into Army professionals. In 1919, a board recommended establishing a permanent school to conduct a basic course to train newly commissioned chaplains to minister to soldiers of denominations other than their

[8] *Ibid.*, 9.

[9] *Ibid.*; Honeywell, *Chaplains of the U.S. Army*, 201.

[10] Gushwa, *The Best and Worst*, 9-10.

[11] *Ibid.*, 9-12, 74.

own. The course would also prepare them to be Army officers, teaching them Army regulations and customs.[12]

On 15 May 1920, the Chaplain School opened at Camp Grant, Illinois, with a staff of 15 (5 chaplains and 10 other officers), and a student body of 15. The 21 subject curriculum included physical training and map reading. In 1921, the School moved to Camp Knox, Kentucky, then to Fort Wayne, Michigan (in 1922), finally coming to rest at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, in 1924. As part of their duties, the staff and faculty wrote and distributed a correspondence course to train Reserve chaplains. Eventually, because of the low number of Regular Army chaplains to take the course (only one took the course in 1928), the School was deactivated in 1928. During the following years, 85% of the clergy who enrolled in the ongoing correspondence course were commissioned in the Reserves, 14% in the National Guard, and .4% in the Regular Army.[13]

Another development, ranking in importance with the creation of the Office of the Chief of Chaplains, was the establishment of an effective reserve program. This was also a direct result of the National Defense Act of 1920. The Act authorized the three components of the Army: the professional Regular Army, the civilian National Guard, and the civilian Organized Reserves (Officers and Enlisted Reserve Corps). The first chaplains to receive reserve appointments were 100 Chaplain School students who graduated after the Armistice. Chaplains who had served in World War I were invited to apply for commissions. By 1925, more than 1100 accepted. In 1931, the denominational background of the Reserves consisted of 220 Methodists, 188 Presbyterians and an equal number of Episcopalians, 182 Catholics, and 154 Baptists. These five groups contributed 77 percent of the total, and the remainder was divided among 15 other bodies, each of which furnished 75 or less. In order for clergymen to seek Chaplain appointments in both the Regular and Reserve components, they had to be endorsed by an authorized ecclesiastical body. This was articulated in Army Regulation 605-30. Applicants then appeared before a board which reviewed their endorsements and qualifications, and selected the best for commissions.[14]

Duties of Chaplains

Prior to 1920, chaplains' monthly reports were sent to the Adjutant General's office. After that they were sent through channels to the Chief's office, thus enabling him to monitor chaplain's duties. This also allowed him to recommend changes strengthening the chaplaincy.[15] A direct result was the revision of AR 60-5 in 1923 which defined a chaplain's duties:

[12]Honeywell, *Chaplains of the U.S. Army*, 204-5; Gushwa, *The Best and Worst*, 16-19.

[13]*Ibid.*, 18-21.

[14]*Ibid.*, 13-16; Honeywell, *Chaplains of the U.S. Army*, 202-03.

[15]Gushwa, *The Best and Worst*, 21-22.

> Chaplains will be employed on no duties other then those required of them by law, or pertaining to their profession as clergymen, when a exigency of the service . . . shall make it necessary. Chaplains are not available for detail as post exchange officers or as counsel for the defense in court-martials.[16]

Additional training manuals further elaborated duties, yet many chaplains were still assigned jobs that had nothing to do with their training.

Officially, chaplains conducted Sunday services, Bible studies, evangelistic meetings, baptisms, weddings and funerals. They also visited their soldiers on and off the training areas, in barracks, hospitals and stockades. They arranged lecture series and worked with civic organizations. Sex hygiene talks became a normal part of chaplain activities. Since education was seen as moral or character-building, chaplains often lectured on such subjects as geography and history. They introduced motion pictures as a teaching tool. Indeed, the first record of training films being used in the Army was by a chaplain. Chaplains taught classes on citizenship, patriotic themes, current events and sociological subjects. They sponsored dramatics, reading and debate clubs, and they also devoted much time to teaching soldiers to read and write.[17]

Controversy Over Rank

In 1926, the branch won a major victory to improve the status of chaplains as officers. Chaplains were addressed as "chaplain" rather than by rank, emphasizing the role of the chaplain as a clergyman in uniform. In 1918, at General Pershing's direction, special regulations mandated removing the insignia of grade from chaplains' uniforms (a right which chaplains had first won in 1914). The cross was to be worn on the solder loops. The controversy increased when members of the Chaplain School, including the commandant, Chaplain Aldred A. Pruden, were removed because they publicly opposed the policy. As Chief of Chaplains, Axton supported the reinstatement of insignia of grade. In a survey of 126 chaplains carried out after the war, 116 emphatically felt that chaplains should wear insignia of rank.[18] Some of the comments included: "Removal has lowered the standard of the chaplain in the eyes of the enlisted men." "Without insignia of rank the Chaplain, like the poor field clerk, is more or less of a nonentity in the Army."[19] A board convened by the Chief of Staff reviewed the testimony and concluded on 19 March 1926:

> It is recommended that the insignia of rank be restored to the uniform of the Chaplain. This recommendation is made in the belief that an immediate contribution to the efficiency of chaplains will result.[20]

[16]Quoted in *Ibid.*, 21.

[17]*Ibid.*, 22-25.

[18]*Ibid.*, 28-31.

[19]Quoted in *Ibid.*, 29-30.

[20]War Department, Circular 19, 19 March 1926, RG 407, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

A Congressional Act of 1926 further provided chaplains with status in the service. It guaranteed chaplains the rank, pay and allowances of grades up to and including colonel. They were also authorized to wear distinctive insignia, Latin crosses or tablets with the Star of David on their lapels.[21]

Initially, a blue flag with a white Latin cross on it to mark the chaplain's tent was the only equipment authorized the chaplain. In 1923, a new Table of Equipment allowed each chaplain "one field desk, regimental, containing a portable typewriter; one folding organ; 300 song books, religious and patriotic; chests as containers for books."[22] A War Department circular permitted camps and an assembly tent, tables and folding benches, along with a flag to be used only for field services.[23] Unofficially, churches and other organizations provided religious tracts, movie and slide projectors, books, magazines, stationery and record players.

Cutbacks Threaten the Chaplaincy

During these two decades the United States retreated into a period of isolationism which would not to end until the late 1930's. One result of this policy was a continuous series of budget and personnel cuts in the Army. A growing wave of pacifism in the 1920's led some churches to demand the withdrawal of chaplains from the military and the reduction of the armed forces. The advent of the Great Depression after 1929 further exacerbated this decline, and by the early 1930's, the size of the Army was approximately that which existed in 1903. The Chaplaincy also faced the threat of reductions.

In 1932, a proposed Army Apportion Act would have reduced the Regular Army Chaplain strength by 80 chaplains (out of 125), or about two-thirds of the authorized strength of the branch. The salvation of the Chaplaincy came from governmental actions to stem and reverse the economic disaster of the Depression. One of the elements of the the New Deal program initiated by the Roosevelt administration in 1933 in order to combat high civilian unemployment was the development of the Civilian Conservation Corps, the CCC. The CCC proved to be a godsend and was the most significant event of the decade for the Chaplaincy. The CCC was not designed to save the branch, but it certainly helped.[24]

Originally conceived with only a subsidiary role for the Army, the CCC quickly became almost wholly administered by the Army, under the general supervision of a civilian director. In a short time more chaplains were on duty with the CCC than in the Army. The Army's role in the CCC was to take the enrollees, clothe them, give them physical examinations, condition them, and then transport them to the various camps. 1300 camps were built in record time, and within three months, 274,375 men worked in such areas as fire fighting, flood

[21]Gushwa, *The Best and Worst*, 31.

[22]War Department, Circular 58, Table III, 1923, RG 407, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; Gushwa, *The Best and Worst*, 39.

[23]War Department, Circular 324, Table V, 1921, RG 407, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; Gushwa, *The Best and Worst*, 39-40.

[24]Honeywell, *Chaplains of the U.S. Army*, 210-11; Gushwa, *The Best and Worst*, 57-58.

control and disaster relief. In contrast to the 125 Regular Army chaplains, more than 300 Regular and Reserve chaplains each year served the CCC at its zenith.[25] "In the 10 year period the CCC lasted," wrote Gushwa, "hundred of chaplains received valuable training working with large numbers of men in camps, with a cross-section of American youth more varied than in a local parish."[26]

Because camps were usually miles apart, and although volunteer civilian clergymen helped ease the burden, chaplains were spread thin and became, out of necessity, circuit riders. This allowed them to be what they were trained to be, clergymen in uniform, providing ministry. Any additional duties were done voluntarily. In 1942, with a war to fight and the economy recovered, Congress voted to end the CCC. During its existence it provided invaluable training to both Regular and Reserve chaplains.[27]

Throughout this period, chaplain activities continued, although on a limited scale. The Chaplain School was closed in 1928 for resident training, but continued correspondence programs. The WPA (Works Progress Administration) funded construction of nine chapels. A Military Chaplains' Association began and a periodical, *The Army Chaplain* appeared. Post-graduate training was introduced and the Army and Navy Hymnal became a reality.[28]

In 1937, Chaplain William R. Arnold was selected to head the Chaplaincy. Arnold was the first Roman Catholic priest to become Chief. He would lead the branch for the next eight years and guide it through World War II. Few individuals have had the impact upon the Army Chaplaincy as did Chaplain Arnold. Born in Ohio of Swiss-Irish parentage, ordained a priest in 1908, he received his commission as a chaplain in 1913. By the time of his appointment as Chief of Chaplains in 1937, he already had behind him a distinguished career, including a stint as commandant of the Chaplain School (1925-1928). As the fifth Chief, he would preside over the largest number of chaplains ever to wear the Army uniform. When Arnold became Chief, the American public and much of its political leadership, although still isolationist, was being forced into the realization that another world war was near. The aggressiveness of totalitarian dictatorships in Germany and Italy, as well as Japanese expansionist policies in Asia, made it clear that the United States had to repair the decay in the American military caused by a generation of neglect. It would be under Chaplain Arnold that the branch slowly began to prepare again for war.

Lessons Learned

One of the more hoary dictums of the historical profession is that articulated by the American philosopher George Santayana, who held that those who do not learn from the past are doomed to repeat it. From the era between the two World Wars, the Chaplaincy may glean a number of lessons, some positive, some negative, as it enters into a period of transition in this last decade of the twentieth

[25]*Ibid.*, 58-68.

[26]*Ibid.*, 58.

[27]*Ibid.*, 69.

[28]*Ibid.*, 77-79.

century. The two decades between the wars can be considered the nadir of both the Army and the Chaplaincy in this century, and if each institution managed to survive these years of neglect and economic depression, nothing that the future may bring should be seen as ominous. While undergoing a continuous series of emasculating personnel and budget reductions, compounded by the strong anti-war, anti-military atmosphere in the nation, the Chaplaincy managed to grow professionally, as well as nurture a cadre which would eventually allow the branch to expand and meet the exigencies of World War II. In an institutional sense, perhaps the greatest failure of the Chaplaincy in this period, "was the lack of contingency plans for selecting, training, and mobilizing large numbers of chaplains in the event of war."[29] Thus, from a study of its past, the Chaplaincy may be able to gain some insights as to how to manage its future; this period between the World Wars is a particularly rich area to examine historically for lessons learned.

[29]*Ibid.*, 80.