

## REFLECTIONS

# A Legacy of Mutual Ministry

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## Military Chaplaincy Review

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U.S. Army and Navy chaplains have been cooperating in shared ministry since 1775. Each branch's chaplain corps celebrates its 250<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in 2025. The differences between our military branches extend to the way each one approaches ministry and advises commands. Better understanding of these similarities and differences strengthens our cooperation and shared ministry. The following are just a few salient instances of how cooperation and collegiality equip us to strengthen and support Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, and Coast Guardsmen to fight and win our nation's wars.

On December 2, 1944, the Cadets of the United States Military Academy and the Midshipmen of the United States Naval Academy squared off in the 45<sup>th</sup> Army-Navy Game. The event represented much more than a mere college football game. "There has never been a sports event, perhaps an event of any kind, that received the attention of so many Americans in so many places around the world," wrote a reporter.<sup>1</sup> Heading into the game, each team was undefeated. In most national polls, Army and Navy were ranked number one and two, respectively. Since the stadium in Annapolis could seat only 12,000 spectators, the venue was moved to Baltimore, which seated 66,000. The price

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  - b **Commander Edward Erwin, CHC, USN** holds a Ph.D. from Duke University in theology and ethics. Chaplain Erwin has written numerous articles on ethics for different academic journals and professional magazines. For over two years, Chaplain Erwin taught ethics for the Naval Leadership and Ethics Center. Presently, Chaplain Erwin serves as the instructor for the Intermediate Leadership Course at Naval Chaplaincy School at Naval Station Newport.
  - c **Captain Charles Varsogea, CHC, USN** serves as Commanding Officer of the Naval Chaplaincy School in Newport, RI. From the Home of Professional Naval Chaplaincy, he trains and educates all chaplains and Religious Program Specialists at all pay-grades, provides an extensive series of annual courses, administers graduate education for the Navy Chaplain Corps, maintains its archive and corps history, and organizes the research and scholarship of the community. The products of these efforts can be found on the Naval Chaplaincy School app. Additionally, he serves as the corps' Director of Training and Education and as Force Chaplain for Naval Education and Training Command.

1 Randy Roberts, *A Team for America: The Army-Navy Game That Rallied a Nation at War* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2012), 234.

of admission was the purchase of a single war bond.<sup>2</sup> Navy, which had won the five previous contests, led in this game as well. Until the fourth quarter, that is, when Army scored two touchdowns for the win.

The Army-Navy Game arrests our Nation's attention each year because every player on the field is prepared to fight, and if necessary, die for those watching. The field of friendly strife helps build the strong character and leadership needed for war. To further illustrate the powerful symbolism of the game, as these athletes competed on the field in Baltimore in the 45<sup>th</sup> Army-Navy Game, Allied Forces on Europe's western front were simultaneously preparing for the Battle of the Bulge.

Chaplains are directly involved in each Army-Navy Game. The prayer offered at the beginning of each game is offered, alternately, by either an Army or a Navy chaplain. At the Naval Chaplaincy School in Newport, Rhode Island, during the Basic Leadership School, accessioned chaplains are taught the fundamentals of prayer for a variety of command-sponsored occasions to include Memorial Day, Veterans Day, a Change of Command Ceremony, and a Promotion Ceremony. The newly commissioned chaplains are taught the elements of simplicity, economy, inclusivity, and passion. On occasion, the training scenario includes writing and delivering a prayer for the Army-Navy Game. Chaplains in both branches share an appreciation for the game just as we share a commitment to chaplain ministry.

In *Biography as Theology*, Jame McClendon, Jr. argues that the best theology is expressed through an eloquent life that epitomizes noble ideals, compelling virtues, and sincere determination.<sup>3</sup> McClendon's central thesis is personified in the professional collegiality and the interfaith commitment of Dr. Charlie Reynolds. Reynolds' ministry to community and country extends over 50 years. Reynolds retired as an Army Chaplain (Colonel) after 28 years of active duty service and currently serves as the Associate Endorser for Military Chaplaincy with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF).<sup>4</sup>

Chaplain Reynolds' military assignments are diverse and extensive, but one particular assignment illustrates the collegial spirit of Army-Navy collaboration over these past 250 years. In 2014-15, during the pandemic of the Ebola crisis, Reynolds was assigned to Liberia as the Joint Forces Command Chaplain for Operation United Assistance. As the only military chaplain for Army, Navy, and Air Force personnel, Chaplain Reynolds

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2 Stephen Ruiz, "80 Years Ago, a Historic Army-Navy Game Captivated a Nation During World War II," *Military.com*, accessed December 12, 2024, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2024/12/05/80-years-ago-historic-army-navy-game-captivated-nation-during-world-war-ii.html>.

3 James McClendon, Jr., *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974), 37-38.

4 Aaron Weaver, "Retired US Army Chaplain Charlie Reynolds to serve as Associate Endorser for Military Chaplains," *CBF News Update*, accessed January 26, 2025, <https://cbfblog.com/2021/05/11/retired-us-army-chaplain-charlie-reynolds-to-serve-as-associate-endorser-for-military-chaplains/>.

provided religious support to all military members. Reynolds remembers the Seabees Commander had asked him to meet his Sailors at a hanger after they had unloaded tons of fragile medical supplies for the disease-infected country. He recalls that after their intense workout, the Seabees were glad to get a break from their heavy labor, and they used this break to attend worship services he provided. Reynolds explained the Seabees gathered round the stacks of medical supplies upon which the Chaplain Assistant had set up Communion for worship. Particularly meaningful for Chaplain Reynolds was the fact that the backdrop for this sacred moment of worship was the Seabees' great striving to alleviate human suffering. The singular moment captured both God's love for humanity and humanity's love for neighbor.

Chaplain Reynolds' ministry embodies just one of the ways military chaplaincy differs from civilian ministry: "There are ministers who prefer to preach in cathedrals with stained glass windows. I prefer the sacred space created with shipping containers for a Unit of Seabees eager to receive God's Word during a time of stressful challenges."<sup>5</sup> When mission constraints prevented a Navy chaplain from being present for sailors, an Army chaplain was there to care for the genuine needs of the Navy Seabees in a time of pandemic crisis, looming danger, and separation from family.

Renée Owen, Director of Chaplaincy and Pastoral Care for CBF with the nearly 900 endorsed chaplains and counselors world-wide, said of Reynolds' current service, "Charlie is passionate about caring for our military chaplains and their families, including helping them to navigate a complex accession system within each branch of the U.S. Armed Forces."<sup>6</sup> As an Army chaplain, Reynolds embodied a robust working relationship with chaplains of all military services, highlighting collaboration and respect befitting the profession of arms. "One of the things I most love as an Endorser for Military Chaplains," Reynolds said, "is the exposure I have to different branches of the military. While visiting Navy Captain Bill Stewart I had the privilege of being piped aboard for the first time for a tour of the USS Philippine Sea (CG-58)."<sup>7</sup> Routinely, Chaplain Reynolds calls up his chaplains and asks for prayer requests. Then over the phone, he prays for family, upcoming deployments, ethical quandaries, and agonizing personal issues. As we recognize and acknowledge touchpoints between Army and Navy chaplains, the continued example of Chaplain Reynolds reminds us that we are to build bridges so that our spiritual resources may be of service to our country with the highest standards of professionalism, devotion to

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<sup>5</sup> Charlie Reynolds, email to Edward Erwin, January 23, 2025.

<sup>6</sup> Weaver, "Endorser for Military Chaplains."

<sup>7</sup> Reynolds, email message to Edward Erwin, January 24, 2025.

duty, and esprit de corps. Even in retirement, Chaplain Reynolds quietly demonstrates the ideal collegiality needed between Army and Navy chaplains serving God and country.

Our final observation that highlights the history of cooperation between Army and Navy chaplains is set during the Global War on Terrorism in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Retired U.S. Navy Chaplain Michael Langston compares his interaction with Army chaplains during combat deployments to Afghanistan in 2005 and Iraq in 2007-08. As a student at the Naval War College in 2004, Chaplain Langston was involved in discussions, research, and writing on the value of religious leader engagements. The following year he deployed with the joint staff of Lieutenant General Eikenberry's (U.S. Army) Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan. His duties included managing and supporting about 170 chaplains from 35 different coalition countries. The many different national and military cultures represented on the Army-led, combined forces staff made Chaplain Langston's duties especially challenging. He recalls, "I remember wishing I had had more training on the Army's day-to-day business practices. What senior officers and fellow staff expected from me as a chaplain wasn't *that* different from how the Marines operated, but the Army expected me to operate as a staff officer in ways the Navy and Marine Corps had not."<sup>8</sup> The dynamic mission necessitated moving Religious Support Teams (RSTs) across the battlefield to care for coalition members' different religious needs and to support commanders' stability operations through engagements with local religious leaders.

The task of moving these RSTs resulted in friction with a senior Army chaplain at one of the lower echelon Army divisions. This Army chaplain frequently pointed out that while these two O6 chaplains were the same rank, he outranked Chaplain Langston in terms of date-of-rank. Eventually, the Navy Captain and the Army Colonel chaplains reached a minimal level of cooperation that facilitated the commanding general's mission. Still, occasional instances of friction occurred. Midway through the deployment the Army's Deputy Chief of Chaplains had occasion to visit theater. This visit included a series of one-on-one visits with Chaplain Langston. Langston recalls, "Chaplain Carver helped me distinguish between the differences in our military cultures and the differences that were merely based on our [Langston's and the Army division chaplain's] personalities. He reassured me I had the training and the experience to do the job I was assigned. He prayed with me. He didn't just develop me professionally; he cared for me pastorally."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Langston, in interview with Nathan Kline, February 21, 2025.

<sup>9</sup> Langston, interview with Kline.

In January 2006 Chaplain Langston deployed to Iraq with Major General Walt Gaskin and the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF), which included the 2nd Marine Division, Air Wing, Logistics Group, and the Army's 1st Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division (of which 2 MEF was issued Operational Control). The religious affairs mission in Al-Anbar Iraq, which included Fallujah and Ramadi, required creative solutions. During this deployment Chaplain Langston also experienced challenges. However, this time the resistance he experienced came from senior Marine officers in the 2 MEF's G3 and G3 air sections. The G3 argued precious Marine air assets were reserved for operational priorities, "not for chaplains." Interestingly, the solution to this challenge came because of Army battalion chaplains, acting on their commanders' orders, who were moving throughout the 2 MEF's area of operations. Chaplain Langston helped the G3 understand that Army chaplains caring for Soldiers, Marines, and Seabees and engaging local religious leaders in stability operations were fulfilling their commanders' missions. The subordinate Army RSTs needed and deserved his guidance and support. "This did the trick."<sup>10</sup> Prioritizing air travel led to Chaplain Langston and his RSTs' effectively covering the battlefield in support of downtrace RSTs. This expanded chaplains' influence when advising commanders and their formations across western Iraq and played a critical factor in the success of what is now referred to as the Al-Anbar Awakening.<sup>11</sup> The capability Army battalion chaplains displayed for their own commanders' missions expanded Marine commanders' understanding of what their own Navy chaplains brought to the fight—which, in turn, led to Chaplain Langston's committed leadership and guidance that he and his RSTs provided to Army RSTs in subordinate units. Just as a senior Army chaplain had ministered to Chaplain Langston in Afghanistan in 2005, he was supporting the ministries of subordinate Army RSTs in Iraq in 2007. In each case, the religious support mission succeeded because of collegiality and cooperation between Army and Navy chaplains and RSTs.

The legacy of ministry shared by both Army and Navy chaplains, celebrating 250 years, is a testament to the power of purpose in the face of adversity. From the lighthearted traditions of the Army-Navy Game to the front lines of global conflict, chaplains from both branches have consistently demonstrated a profound commitment to serving the spiritual needs of our service members. As we have seen through the inspiring examples of Chaplain Charlie Reynolds and Chaplain Michael Langston, the ability to bridge service, cultural, and even religious differences to foster collegiality is not merely a nicety, it's a strategic imperative that directly impacts mission accomplishment and the combat potential of our fighting forces.

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<sup>10</sup> Langston, interview with Kline.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Silverman, *Awakening Victory: How Iraqi Tribes and American Troops Reclaimed al Anbar Province and Defeated al Qaeda in Iraq*. (Havertown, PA: Casemate, 2011), 100.

The friendliness of the “field of friendly strife” that defines the Army-Navy Game extends far beyond the gridiron; it embodies the spirit of shared purpose that we hope guides all our endeavors. When Army and Navy chaplains work in concert, respecting their distinct approaches while leveraging their collective strengths, they create a formidable force for good. Working with shared purpose directly strengthens the soul of the warfighter, providing vital spiritual resilience, moral guidance, and compassionate care in the crucible of combat and the rigors of service. This unwavering support empowers our soldiers, sailors, marines, and coast guardsmen to fight and win our nation’s wars, securing the freedom and safety of the people they so bravely defend.

Our hope for our two corps (and for our partners in the Air Force, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and other chaplaincies) is that we will carry forward this legacy of mutual ministry, continually seeking opportunities for deeper understanding, collaboration, and shared service. Strengthening the spiritual core of those who serve is a duty, a privilege, and a moral obligation. It is work for which we are all willing to risk our own lives as chaplains. It is a purpose worth pursuing together. The force of the soul is the soul of our force.

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