

REFLECTIONS

Move with Purpose: Lessons Learned off the Coast of Gaza

Caleb Miller, M.Div.^a, O'Kuria Williams^{1b}

¹ U.S. Army

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Using their deployment as a case study, Chaplain (Captain) Miller and Sergeant Williams argue that effective battlefield circulation as a team requires that UMT members get to know each other, plan with clear, measurable objectives, and commit to continually assess the survivability of any plan.

So there we were, the unit ministry team (UMT) had just spent two and a half days with the nine-person crew of a Roll On/Roll Off Discharge Facility (RRDF), sailing along the coast from Ashdod to Gaza City as part of a mission to deliver humanitarian aid. "Sailing" was what they called it, anyway. Without the bobbing of water beneath, it would have seemed like standing still. "Facility" proved to be a misleading term, too. It felt more like drifting on a floating metal parking lot with no discernable bow or stern or engine or barrier at the edge.

Everyone on the platform had their "battle rattle" close—that is, their helmet and vest with plates, fitted with special tan floatation devices we hoped would deploy if we fell in the water. The unit was tasked with facilitating humanitarian assistance to refugees who had very little shelter, food, or security. The Israel-Hamas War raged like a thunderstorm—right over their heads, it seemed—with enough power and noise to make everyone feel small. For now, the danger of the combat zone down the coast was only faint booms in the distance. This RRDF platform would remain five nautical miles off the coast and be used to stage vehicles for loading on to smaller, faster logistics vessels that would sail right up to the beach.

The relative lack of danger in comparison to other crews did not translate into less urgency. There was almost no downtime for the RRDF crew. Between the troubleshooting when pieces started to warp and the furious lashing and re-lashing of lines that kept snapping due to the height and angle of oncoming waves, the work was relentless. The sun and saltwater created a sauna effect, too.

^a **Chaplain (Captain) Caleb Miller** currently serves as the battalion chaplain for the 319th Intelligence and Electronic Warfare Battalion out of Fort Bragg, NC.

^b **Sergeant O'Kuria Williams** currently serves as the brigade religious affairs non-commissioned officer for the 7th Transportation Brigade (Expeditionary), out of Fort Eustis, VA.

All this amounted to very little opportunity for small talk, very few creature comforts, and perhaps most unfortunately of all, no latrine. The chaplain in this equation, Chaplain (Captain) Miller, clumsily tried to help repair frayed lines or offer to run and get tools before realizing he was probably in the way. Within a few hours he found a pile of discarded material and pulled his helmet down over his face for a nap.

Was this what properly integrated battlefield circulation looked like?

Three days earlier, the chaplain wanted to sail with the other piece of equipment, the modular causeway system called the Trident Pier. This was, for all intents and purposes, the main event. The initial sail down the coast to install the platform and set up initial security measures off the coast of the warzone was exactly what President Biden had announced in his State of the Union address months earlier. No one could predict with certainty what kind of danger lay ahead—from unmanned weapons systems, mortars, snipers, rockets, speedboats, or improvised explosive devices. The Trident Pier crew knew the stakes. These were the soldiers most in need of encouragement. These were the soldiers most likely to suffer if something went wrong.

The commanders and staff at battalion and brigade were busy attending to thousands of logistical questions. They left it to the chaplain to discern where his team would be most useful.

Chaplain Miller insisted that the Trident Pier sail was the center of gravity. His counterpart, a non-commissioned officer (NCO), Sergeant Williams, who had previously deployed, was deeply concerned about survivability. She made it clear that she would support the chaplain whatever the cost, but they were the only two religious support personnel for many miles. It would take days to get anyone else anywhere near this cluster of vessels, especially if something went terribly wrong. There was very little she could do, even armed, if something were to happen in the initial hours of operations on the Trident Pier. She also worried about what would happen to morale if the chaplain became a casualty.

The supervisory chaplain team (at a regional command) and the chief petty officer in charge of security both sided with the religious affairs NCO. Eventually the chaplain relented and developed a plan to sail with the RRDF instead, as a sort of consolation to get out and be “present” somewhere. But a rift in the UMT was already starting to widen.

Was this what collaborating for religious support operations should look like?

The RRDF sail that was supposed to be about twenty-four hours turned into thirty-six. It left everyone involved tired. Chaplain Miller was begrudging through the morning and afternoon of the first day, but by the end of the afternoon of the second day was upbeat. He was able to contact a soldier

he had been concerned about, and this trip amounted in his mind to going where the suffering was, even participating for a few moments in that pain, even if it was not sailing with the Trident Pier into possibly greater danger.

Meanwhile, though she tried not to show it, Sergeant Williams transitioned from a sense of relief to near demoralization. She engaged in exhausting dialogue over how much danger the UMT could theoretically face and was relieved that her chaplain listened to reason. What followed were days of a bizarre sequence of baking in the sun, suppressing nausea, using every ounce of her attention to stay positive and ignore the many discomforts of this sail as she realized she had no idea why they were out there. This was nothing like Iraq.

When they reached the tactical operations center (TOC) after this slog, the UMT sat down just the two of them to review what happened. What went well? What could be improved? Tensions were high. Responses were cold. It became clear that the team members were not in agreement about how that visit went, what should be done next, or even the purpose of moving around to all these vessels in the first place.

The moment that changed everything, after many grievances were finally aired from both members of the UMT, is when the chaplain asked if his religious affairs counterpart had ever heard the phrase “ministry of presence.” She had—but did not really know what it meant. After a brief explanation that this involved suffering with and providing a calming non-anxious presence for soldiers rather than giving them anything or having a specific kind of conversation, something became clearer in her mind about why the chaplain intentionally chose to, from her perspective, awkwardly stand around.

From Chaplain Miller’s perspective, the fact that this needed to be explained was the true shock. Is it really that hard to see that I am just trying to spend time with them? he thought. He had not properly stopped to realize that terms commonplace in his world as a chaplain might be unhelpfully vague, if not utterly foreign, to her. It is not as though chaplains agree on what “ministry of presence” means. He also had not considered how an open-ended approach to spending time with soldiers or a commitment to suffering with them amid real-world chaos could quickly become a liability.

Lessons Learned

These events are more comical and embarrassing in hindsight, but we would like to offer three reflections on what we learned based on this experience.

The pivotal after-action review (AAR) revealed several gaps in knowledge and planning on the team. We had not really gotten to know each other. And we had not planned for each visit to a new site with clear objectives, ideally some tasks that were measurable. And we were already behind in the process

of continual assessment, particularly on the survivability of any plan. Before we could continue circulating with intention—to carry out the commander’s intent or even act in the absence of guidance—we needed to close these gaps, and fast.

Get to know each other.

Religious pluralism and staff work rarely come easily. A freshly minted chaplain straight out of Chaplains Basic Office Leadership Course (CHBOLC) and a religious affairs specialist straight out of Advanced Individual Training (AIT) will probably have to rapidly adjust their expectations, learn to adapt to a unique professional relationship, and find commonalities if they want to succeed. Chaplains may have more education but vary widely in administrative style and ability. Religious affairs specialists may have more inroads with enlisted personnel but might find it hard to trust the mentors and leaders that have the most to teach them: their chaplains. There may also be cultural or socio-economic differences and even religious or theological disagreements.

The UMT on this humanitarian aid mission was no exception. The chaplain was relatively introverted, contemplative, and prioritized presence or depth of conversation. His teammate was extroverted and prioritized having brief interactions with as many servicemembers as possible before quickly moving on to the next vessel or activity. The chaplain found ideas and dialogue compelling. He had no problem talking to a single servicemember for hours on end to learn about their story and convictions and felt no need in the moment to cover everywhere at once. The religious affairs NCO was relationally oriented but driven by results. She envisioned briefly and seamlessly cheering servicemembers up with a smile, perhaps a personalized prayer card or some other token of appreciation and moving to the next objective. The chaplain rarely addressed entire formations unless invited to do so. If this NCO could put out a general announcement to save time, she would jump at the chance.

There were also other differences, including generation, race, gender, and even hobbies. Chaplain Miller had been in the Army longer, and in the watercraft community longer, but he had never deployed to a combat zone. He participated in international exercises with the battalion the previous summer where he learned the joys and drudgeries of joint logistics. He had logged many hours out on the water and had visited soldiers at seaports in a friendly host nation. Meanwhile, Sergeant Williams was brand new to the unit and maritime life and culture, but she already had a short notice combat deployment under her belt.

There was no time to do more than rehearse the few differences that could be observed quickly. Yet those observations made all the difference.

In our case, this small adjustment helped both parties recognize that battlefield circulation was not the zero-sum game we had inadvertently made it. When we circulated using the chaplain's method, as illustrated above, the NCO had trouble staying engaged. To simply switch to the way the NCO preferred was not the answer, either. Not only did the chaplain start to feel rushed and overwhelmed by the need for follow-up, a rapid-check-in method was rarely feasible. The vessels were miles apart in contested international waters, never staying in the same spot more than a few hours. Even in ideal circumstances, two vessels were rarely in the same place at the same time for more than a few minutes.

Our answer was to vary how and why we attempted to circulate. We got comfortable with changes to the plan which were usually outside our control. And we erred on the side of over-communication, which leads to the next point.

Clearly, specifically, and repeatedly define objectives.

Even after our AAR, early in the mission our attempts to circulate were just to get green on our tracker for update briefs. We had agreed upon a goal to visit every vessel at least once every two weeks. This was daunting because there were between fourteen and eighteen sites and vessels to circulate to at any point in the mission. Just getting there was a chore.

Choosing where to go in those early days was straightforward. It was easy to see where we had not been within the last two weeks. We tried our best to coordinate transportation there. Within a few weeks and especially after the fateful RRDF sail, something was missing. Not all vessels had the same needs, and some crews were quite small. Even assuming we could get somewhere (never a guarantee), once there, there was often a feeling of "now what?"

This is a familiar scene that plays out for chaplains in field exercises, training events, staff meetings, and retreats. Perhaps after considering the commander's priorities of effort, deciding to visit a range, or receiving funds to plan an event, the chaplain has proposed to circulate to a particular location. The religious affairs NCO arranges for transportation, packs all the supplies she thinks she will need, thinking that she is carrying out the order. The religious affairs NCO plans out how to get the chaplain safely from point A to B and back again to A. But it turns out there were a host of implied tasks that may or may not have been communicated, or that got shelved for later in the rush. Role confusion turns to resentment.

There are plenty of stories of chaplains sacrificing safety to care for the wounded or to save lives. There are also chaplains, perhaps emboldened or inspired by these stories, who practically yank their enlisted counterpart across the battlefield into all sorts of danger. There are also religious affairs specialists and NCOs who plead with their chaplain to leave their office to talk to their soldiers or participate in training. There are chaplains who

wonder why their religious affairs specialist or NCO lacks confidence or does not follow through. There are also religious affairs specialists and NCOs who complain about receiving lists of tasks and crisp directives without any sense of collaboration on a project.

A common thread in these anecdotes, whether exemplary or disastrous, is an inconsistent method of communication. Sometimes chaplains fail to communicate how the efforts of the religious affairs specialist/NCO contribute to the UMT's mission. Other times their religious affairs counterparts fail to ask follow-up questions, anticipate needs, or maintain the tactical proficiency needed to respond to a crisis or to shoot, move, and communicate. Dysfunction follows either way.

In our case, identifying concrete tasks prior to these vessel visits started with simple prompting questions. What is the desired outcome? Is it simply being seen by as many soldiers as possible? Is it a particular conversation or soldier that needs a wellness check? Should the UMT prioritize encouragement of junior enlisted soldiers or leader engagement? The answers to these questions crystalized into bullets easily transferred onto slides or situation reports (SITREPs): *We are circulating to the Roy Benevidez to (1) retrieve ecclesiastical supplies from our CONNEX, (2) review their MASCAL plan, and (3) check in on the battalion staff. We are circulating to the Cardigan Bay to (1) follow up on a man overboard incident, (2) provide at least one prayer service and (3) assess morale of the seaport operations company. SGT Williams is circulating to the Trident Pier to (1) assist Mayor Cell with distributing lunch to the day shift and (2) check on two force protection soldiers.*

Being able to articulate why we were going to a vessel gave us more credibility and ultimately, in the absence of emergencies or credible threats, more freedom of movement. Plans and operations understood these were not arbitrary transport requests. This freedom was crucial for the task: the UMT provided support for two echelons at once: the battalion operations node which was very much “down and in,” and the brigade staff focusing “up and out.”

The concrete objectives also formed a coherent picture of what we were trying to accomplish together, which improved morale internal to the team. Even when there were significant delays, there was comfort in having direction.

Consider survivability.

From our perspective, the humanitarian aid mission was something like a live test of readiness in a multi-domain era. Behind the constant activities of cargo handlers, mechanics, technicians, deckhands, engineers, drivers, cooks, security details, infantry, staff officers, and command teams, there was an unpredictability that mirrored the operational environment John Nagl and Katie Crombe imagine as they contemplate the current war in Ukraine:

diminished communications, constant movement, irregular logistical resupply, and innumerable security threats.¹ UMT-specific challenges include limited windows for worship service attendance, hazards of frequent transfers in the Mediterranean Sea, the toll it takes on a team to wait for something terrible to happen.

Command Sergeant Major Mobarakzadeh encourages Army chaplains to “go where the suffering is.”² Many have called on chaplains to do similarly over the years, though in future conflicts they may not have to go anywhere. The chaplain involved in the Gaza mission wanted so desperately to do this for his soldiers on their initial sail.

A lot rides on how chaplains and their enlisted counterparts navigate this tension between continuous circulation to check on soldiers and readiness to assume a defensive posture. None of the core competencies of Army chaplaincy (nurture the living, care for the wounded, or honor the fallen) can be achieved without a willingness to go where suffering is and at times to take significant risks. But this call to action raises further questions about what principles, if any, should guide that movement.

The job descriptions of chaplains or religious affairs professionals might give the impression that these individuals need to be practically everywhere at once: always in the office yet always out in the field, with time to attend meetings and collaborate, circulating regularly to all known locations yet prepared for all contingencies. Circulating both to advise the command and to nurture the living or care for the wounded at the same time can be difficult.

FM 1-05 stresses monitoring and adapting to change during offensive and defensive operations and prioritizes movement only during stability operations.³ FM 1-05’s offensive/defensive/stability framework does not resolve all tension between being pro-active and reactive, and the Gaza mission did not fit neatly in this framework. It was an operation to shape (offensive), yet also to provide humanitarian aid to refugees (stability), with a posture of bracing for hazards and security threats that would halt all movement (defensive). But the FM gave the UMT a place to start and tasks to consider.

1 John Nagl and Katie Crombe, eds. *A Call to Action: Lessons from Ukraine for the Future Force* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College Press, 2024). There were relevant differences, too: less mobility, a clear center of gravity in terms of pallet download, time to make decisions about movement, and mercifully no mass casualties.

2 Nema Mobarakzadeh, “Go Where the Suffering Is: CSMs and Chaplains Can Partner to Improve Spiritual Readiness.” *NCO Journal* (Muddy Boots), January 24, 2025, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Muddy-Boots/Go-Where-the-Suffering-Is/>.

3 Department of the Army, Field Manual (FM) 1-05, *Religious Support* (Washington DC: Department of the Army, 2019), 4-28 thru 4-34.

The logistics community has placed a renewed emphasis on survivability that equally applies to religious support. FM 1-05 states that “survivability is the ability to protect personnel, information, infrastructure, and assets from destruction or degradation. UMTs integrate survivability considerations with operational planning to maximize their ability to function despite multiple threats to their safety.”⁴ FM 3-83 (which now supersedes 1-05) has added even emphasis on survivability and recommends that UMTs train to use analog products and study land navigation.⁵ Many writers now contemplate anti-access/area denial capabilities or staggeringly high casualty counts.⁶ UMTs in large-scale combat operations may have even less time and opportunity to circulate than we did operating off the coast of Gaza.

Frontloading vital conversations about risk, danger, and purpose as early as possible (ideally before deployment) will set the conditions for greater UMT cohesion and avoid scenarios like those rehearsed in the introduction. UMT members can also talk about previous experiences, their tolerance for risk, and how the chaplain and religious affairs NCO can advise the commander and command sergeant major about what the priorities of religious support should be during all phases of operations.

Ideally the enlisted member of the team, as the combatant, takes the lead in this discussion of risk mitigation. He or she is responsible, along with the chaplain, for being tactically proficient and aware of how operational variables (Political, Military, Economic, Social, Information, Infrastructure, Physical Environment, and Time) relate to security concerns, constraints on movement, and contingencies.⁷ As uncomfortable as these conversations can be in the moment, it is imperative that UMTs have conversations about what to do if one, the other, or both members become casualties. It is less important to settle on a perfect plan and more important know what each can expect from the other.

Constant assessment is unavoidable, of course. Many details simply cannot be assessed from afar. Once in theater with some time on the ground (or in the water, as the case may be), some prompting questions to carefully and continuously consider include: When, if ever, can we afford to do split operations? Where is the “front line” or “center of gravity”? What is the rally point if we get separated? How prepared is the religious affairs specialist to

⁴ Army, FM 1-05, 4-21.

⁵ Department of the Army, FM 3-83 (1-05), *Religious Affairs* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2025), 2-33 thru 2-41.

⁶ “[T]he future operating environment and adversarial threat requires a sustainment architecture that prioritizes effectiveness and resiliency over efficiency.” Brian Quinn, “Sustaining Multidomain Operations: The Logistical Challenge Facing the Army’s Operating Concept,” *Military Review* (March-April 2023), 132. Cf. The proposal to move from a “man” to a “zone” defense minimizing risky movement to care for casualties in David Clement and Hector Lopez, “Casualty Ministry and Religious Support,” in *Religious Support During Large Scale Combat Operations* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Center for Army Lessons Learned, 2024), 7-12.

⁷ Department of the Army, Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 1-05.03, *Religious Support and External Advisement* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2019), 2-10 thru 2-13; cf. FM 3-83 (1-05), 4-8.

circulate without the chaplain if something happens to him or her, or vice versa? Where is the chaplain's presence a liability? Should the UMT avoid certain hotspots altogether or can that liability be mitigated?

Conclusion

John C. Maxwell suggests that “a wise person learns from his mistakes. A wiser one learns from others’ mistakes.”⁸ As UMTs at all echelons refine and assess their training for any future conflicts, it is vital that they get to know each other, plan with clear, measurable objectives in view, and commit to continually assess the survivability of any plan. Our recommendations above are nothing earth-shattering, more reminders than new insights. We think that precisely because these recommendations are so fundamental they are worth additional emphasis. It is easy to overestimate one’s abilities in communication or self-awareness or leadership. It is also easy to forget how battlefield circulation is both an art and a science. It is not just a task to be performed by an individual but a skill to continually develop as a team.⁹

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⁸ John C. Maxwell, *Leadership Gold: Lessons I've Learned from a Lifetime of Leading* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 154.

⁹ This article developed out of a garrison unit ministry training presentation facilitated at Fort Eustis on 13 March 2025. We are grateful to the participants for thoughtful discussion and feedback.