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REFLECTIONS

Strengthening the Backbone: The Importance of NCO Voices in *Military Chaplaincy Review*

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> "The nation that will insist on drawing a broad line of demarcation between the fighting man and the thinking man is liable to find its fighting done by fools and its thinking done by cowards."
> — Sir William Francis Butler

The Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) Corps is the backbone of the United States Army, a title earned through centuries of tactical expertise, frontline leadership, and the preservation of institutional standards. Yet, unlike routine operations, apart from the *NCO Journal* itself, this backbone is often absent from professional military literature. Since 1972, *Military Chaplaincy Review* (MCR)[1] has hosted dialogue on the intersection of faith, ethics, and military operations. A survey of the journal's contributors, however, points to a persistent imbalance: the discourse is carried out overwhelmingly by commissioned officers and civilian academics, while enlisted authorship remains a rare exception. This asymmetry creates a perspective gap that cuts against the grain of the professionalization of the Chaplain Corps as well as the Corps' ability to fulfill its dual mandate of religious affairs advisement and leader development across the force.

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1 *Military Chaplaincy Review* has also gone by *The Army Chaplain Corps Journal*, *The Army Chaplaincy*, and *Military Chaplain's Review*. For a brief overview of the history of the publication see Adam Tietje, "The Rise and Fall of Military Chaplain's Review," *Harding Project*, January 8, 2026, https://www.hardingproject.com/p/throwback-thursday-855.

This observation is not a critique of opportunity but intentionality, and the reason for the absence is practical more than cultural. NCOs operate under relentless time constraints, and the writing they are most often required to produce—the operation order, the counseling form, the standard operating procedure—rewards brevity and compliance rather than argument and analysis. Few have seen an enlisted exemplar published in these pages, and fewer still have been shown the path that leads from the field note to the finished manuscript. The result is a journal that reflects the institution's commissioned voice with great fidelity and its enlisted voice almost not at all. Closing the gap is the aim of this article.

To fully realize its mission of advancing the theory and practice of chaplaincy *Military Chaplaincy Review* must actively increase NCO contributions. This transformation requires a three-fold approach. It requires recognizing the foundational necessity of academic writing as a component of modern lethality, valuing the irreplaceable operational insights of the 56M Religious Affairs Noncommissioned Officer, and building a formal structure. We argue for a dedicated NCO editor and *MCR* ambassador combined with institutional curriculum integration within the 56M professional development institutional pipeline at the U.S. Army Institute for Religious Leadership.

The Lethality of the Pen: Academic Writing in the Profession of Arms

Academic writing within the military profession among enlisted personnel is often misunderstood as a secondary administrative task, subordinate to physical readiness or tactical proficiency. However, in the contemporary operating environment—defined by the Army's shift toward Multi-Domain Operations (MDO)—the ability to think critically and communicate clearly in real time is a lethality multiplier.[2] Exponentially more effective than social media hot takes, the hard work of military academic writing kills lazy arguments, exposes logic vulnerabilities, increases attention to detail, and sharpens concise and effective communication.[3] Academic writing is the cognitive crucible in which raw experience is forged into doctrine. When a soldier engages in the rigorous process of researching, drafting, editing, and subjecting their work to a double-blind peer-review process, they are not merely performing an academic exercise; they are developing the cognitive

2 Mikayla Easley, "AUSA NEWS: Army Publishes New Doctrine for Multi-Domain Operations," *National Defense*, October 11, 2022, https://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/articles/2022/10/11/army-publishes-new-doctrine-for-multi-domain-operations.

3 Noel DeJesus. "Writing Kills Lazy Arguments," *The Harding Project*, April 4, 2024, https://www.hardingproject.com/p/writing-kills-lazy-arguments.

agility required to navigate the ambiguity of modern conflict.[4] Multi-Domain Operations, in the context of mission command, distribute decision-making to the lowest levels and compress the time available to make sense of it. The soldier who has practiced building an argument on paper is better prepared to build one under pressure, where the cost of a hasty inference is measured in more than a grade.[5]

The Army's recent commitment to the *Harding Project* underscores this institutional shift. Named after Major Edwin Forrest Harding, who revolutionized military journals in the 1930s, the project advocates for a renewal of professional discourse across all ranks. The core tenet of the project is that professional writing is the connective tissue of the Army.[6] It allows a sergeant in a remote outpost to share a lesson learned that might save lives in a future conflict halfway across the globe. For the NCO, writing serves as a bridge between the tactical and the strategic. By articulating their experiences in a peer-reviewed format like *MCR*, NCOs transition from passive executors of orders to active architects of the profession of arms. This transition is essential for an NCO Corps that is increasingly expected to operate independently in decentralized environments where the strategic corporal or strategic sergeant must make decisions with international implications.[7]

The Grounded Perspective: Why the 56M Voice is Irreplaceable

While the necessity of writing applies to all soldiers, the enlisted contribution to *MCR* is uniquely vital because of the specific role of the 56M Religious Affairs Specialist (RAS). In the Unit Ministry Team (UMT) structure, the chaplain and the RAS represent two distinct but inseparable halves of a mission-critical whole. The chaplain, as both staff officer and religious leader, provides high-level ethical advice as well as pastoral care. While RASs are also staff-integrated, they often operate in the spaces between—the motor pools, the barracks, the logistics and administrative nodes, and the security perimeter. Particularly at the battalion level, RASs are naturally oriented to function as pulse-takers of organizational morale, ethical climate, and

4 Trent J. Lythgoe et al., *Professional Writing: The Command and General Staff College Writing Guide*, Student Text 22-2 (Fort Leavenworth, KS: US Army Command and General Staff College, 2023), 1-4, https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/home/Resources/CGSC-Professional-Writing-Guide.pdf.

5 Department of the Army, *Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces*, Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0 (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, July 2019).

6 Randy A. George, Gary M. Brito, and Michael A. Weimer, "Strengthening the Profession: A Call to All Army Leaders to Revitalize Our Professional Discourse," *Modern War Institute at West Point*, June 20, 2023, https://mwi.westpoint.edu/strengthening-the-profession/.

7 Charles C. Krulak, "The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War," *Marines Magazine* 83, no. 1 (January 1999): 18-23. https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA399413.pdf.

spiritual readiness.[8] The role of the RAS increases in responsibility and influence at scale, as the NCO moves from the tactical to the operational to the strategic level command.[9] What remains consistent throughout are their core capabilities of Religious Support Provider and Religious Support Staff Advisor in addition to their three core competencies of Strengthening Spiritual Readiness, Integrating Religious Support into Operations, and Managing Religious Support Resources.[10] These capabilities and competencies are honed and refined throughout the NCO's career and provide the Chaplain Corps a specialized set of skills to nurture the living, care for the wounded, and honor the fallen that the commissioned officers are not trained or equipped to accomplish independently.[11] Academic writing, peer-review, and publication are where the 56M's core capabilities are sharpened and made transmissible. The *MCR* platform prevents After Action Reports, lessons-learned, and white papers from falling into the abyss of share drives and file folders, elevating the enlisted voice and extending its reach outside the chain of command to spark innovation and drive meaningful change.

Without this NCO perspective, *MCR* offers an incomplete, and perhaps even sanitized, view of military ministry. RASs possess both grounded wisdom—knowledge derived from the direct, unvarnished friction of daily operations—along with tactical pragmatism, cognitive agility, and a solution-driven orientation that lends itself naturally to the Army Transformation Initiative.[12] A chaplain may write an excellent theoretical piece on moral injury, but it is the Religious Affairs NCO who operationalizes it by turning theory into practice. RASs are poised to provide the critical insights of the enlisted perspective to *MCR* regarding religious support logistics, the nuances of peer-to-peer crisis intervention, budget management, property accountability in austere environments, the training of junior soldiers, fostering identity and culture, navigating differences with joint partners, and integrating religious support into operations.

Consider the battalion Religious Affairs NCO who notices, across weeks of motor-pool conversations and chow-line exchanges, a pattern of corrosion in unit morale long before it registers on any command climate survey, and who improvises a peer-support practice that keeps soldiers connected to care. That

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8 Department of the Army, *Religious Support and the Operations Process*, Field Manual 3-83 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2018), 1-8.

9 Department of the Army, *Military Occupational Classification and Structure*, DA PAM 611-21 (Washington, DC: Army G-1, 2024), 239–41.

10 Department of the Army, *Army Religious Support*, Army Regulation 165-1 (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2024), 16-18.

11 Department of the Army, *U.S. Army Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development Guide: CMF 56 Religious Affairs*, DA PAM 600-25 Smartbook (Washington, DC: Army G-1, 2022), 1-10.

12 Dan Driscoll and Randy A. George, "Letter to the Force: Army Transformation Initiative," *The United States Army*, May 1, 2025, https://www.army.mil/article/285100/letter_to_the_force_army_transformation_initiative.

practice—its design, its failures, and its results—is precisely the knowledge *MCR* exists to preserve, and precisely the knowledge most likely to evaporate the moment its author rotates to a new assignment. Multiply that loss across a career and across a Corps, and the cost of the absent backbone becomes clear.

Constructing the Pipeline: Structural Solutions for NCO Integration

Increasing NCO authorship in *Military Chaplaincy Review* cannot be left to chance or encouragement alone. It requires the implementation of a deliberate, institutionalized pipeline. The first and most critical component of this effort is the establishment of a dedicated NCO editor position. This position should be held by a senior NCO—specifically a graduate of the Sergeants Major Academy (SGM-A) who is familiar with the writing, editing, and publishing processes. The NCO editor would serve as an ambassador from the *MCR* for the enlisted formation. Their role would involve demystifying the submission process, managing a pool of NCO peer-reviewers, and providing the specific type of mentorship that junior NCOs require to move from a Standard Operating Procedure style of writing to an academic, argumentative style.[13]

An editor without reach, however, is merely a title. The value of this position lies in its function as a bridge between the formation and the journal, and that bridge must be actively walked. The NCO editor would carry *MCR* into the space where NCOs already gather – and translate the intimidating grammar of peer review and double-blind submission into an achievable task. Most NCOs do not lack ideas; they lack a guide who can show them the After-Action Report written last week is one revision away from a publishable best-practice article. By cultivating a standing bench of NCO peer reviewers, the NCO editor also ensures that enlisted submissions are elevated by leaders who recognize the texture of the work being described, closing the credibility gap that quietly discourages first-time authors from ever pressing submit.

The second component involves the integration of MCR into the 56M Professional Military Education (PME) system. The assumption that NCOs must be taught to write from scratch is false. The institutional foundation already exists. Both the Advanced Leadership Course (ALC) and the Senior Leaders Course (SLC) are built upon the NCO Common Core Competencies and 56M branch-specific religious affairs tasks, and each already demands rigorous written analysis. ALC requires the leader to interrogate a leadership case study and to construct a persuasive essay

13 Jorge A. Rivera, "From Data to Wisdom: Navigating Research in the Army Profession," *NCO Journal*, February 7, 2025, https://www.armyupress.army.mil/journals/nco-journal/archives/2025/febuary/from-data-to-wisdom/.

defending a contested position. SLC raises the bar further, opening with a dedicated Communicate in Writing block grounded in the Army writing standards before progressing to an analytical essay, a formal staffed study, and sustained work in critical and creative thinking.[14] The skill, in other words, is already being trained. What the system lacks is destination writing. Writing produced inside the schoolhouse currently expires at the schoolhouse door – the argument is graded, returned, and filed, generating no power beyond the gradebook.

But the structural gap is compounded by a deeper one. As one 56M NCO serving in the institutional domain observed, the challenge is fundamentally "a change of mindset of NCOs as they gain rank—more ownership of self-development and professional bearing."[15] NCOs arriving at ALC frequently demonstrate limited doctrinal knowledge beyond initial entry training and progress at SLC is uneven: some begin to cultivate the intellectual ownership that the profession demands, while others remain oriented toward managing information rather than generating knowledge. The contrast is visible at the brigade level: one NCO trains subordinates and builds capability while another manages information flow and calls it leadership. A publication pipeline without a corresponding culture of ownership will produce submissions by exception rather than by habit.

By placing current *MCR* articles on the required reading lists for ALC and SLC, the Chaplain Corps would signal to its mid-grade and senior NCOs that they are expected to be consumers of the professional discourse before they are asked to become contributors to it. This is not an aspirational suggestion but an alignment with standing policy. Army Regulation 600-100 now directs the stewardship of the Army's professional journals and their deliberate integration into PME, and its 2025 revision added explicit emphasis on written communication as a means of developing professional expertise.[16] *MCR* should be the Chaplain Corps' answer to this directive.

The third component converts exposure into output through a direct publication pipeline. The writing assignments already embedded in ALC and SLC should be deliberately modeled on the *MCR*'s submission requirements—matched in length, structure, and citation discipline – so that the distance between a graded course paper and a submittable manuscript is a matter of revisions rather than reinvention. At the conclusion of each course,

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14 Department of the Army, *Army Professional and Leadership Policy*, Army Regulation 600-100 (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2025), paras. 2-17p (15), 3-3.

15 Benjamen Charles Lemieux (Senior Task Analyst/DOT-D NCOIC, U.S. Army Institute for Religious Leadership), in discussion with the authors, June 2026.

16 U.S. Army Institute for Religious Leadership, Religious Affairs Specialist/NCO Advanced Leaders Course, Program of Instruction 561-56M30-C45 (Fort Jackson, SC: U.S. Army Institute for Religious Leadership, 2024); and Religious Affairs Specialist/NCO Senior Leader Course, Program of Instruction 561-56M40-C46 (Fort Jackson, SC: Army Institute for Religious Leadership, 2024). Both not approved for public release; distribution limited.

NCO Academy leadership could identify the Best-in-Class papers: those offering original insight or solving a genuine operational problem. These authors would then be paired with the editorial board and the NCO editor for a collaborative polishing process that carries the work from classroom standard to publication standard. The payoff runs in two directions. The journal gains a renewable stream of high-quality, field-grounded enlisted content, and the NCO gains a tangible, prestigious achievement early enough in a career to shape its trajectory, seeding the lifelong habit of professional contribution.

Taken together, these three components form less a procedure than a flywheel. Trained writers emerge from PME; a guided pipeline carries their best work toward submission; a dedicated editor shepherds that work through review to publication; and the NCOs who publish return to the classroom as the next generation of reviewers and mentors, lowering the activation energy for those behind them. The mechanism is deliberately modest in cost—an additional duty, a reading list, a rubric aligned to a standard that already exists—and precisely because it is modest, it is sustainable. The Harding Project asked the Army to treat professional writing as the connective tissue of the force.[17] The Chaplain Corps now holds both the policy mandate and the institutional architecture to make that tissue grow from the bottom up. The only remaining variable is the will to build it.

Conclusion

Military Chaplaincy Review stands as a testament to the Chaplain Corps' commitment to excellence, but its future success depends on its adaptability and continuous transformation. By elevating the NCO voice, the journal does more than fill pages, it captures the very soul of the formation. The transition of the NCO from a tactical executor to an intellectual contributor is a requirement of the modern profession of arms and is completely aligned with the current state and trajectory of NCO Professional Education, the Harding Project, and the Army Transformation Initiative. The unique, practical, and grounded perspective of the 56M Religious Affairs Specialist provides the missing link between chaplaincy and tactical reality. Through the establishment of an NCO editor and the integration of a publication pipeline within PME, the Chaplain Corps can ensure that its NCO backbone is as articulate as it is strong. If we fail to document the wisdom of our NCOs today, we will bankrupt the leaders of tomorrow. By empowering the NCO to fight with more than just the rifle, we ensure the lessons bought with sweat and sacrifice are preserved as a guiding light for every Unit Ministry Team that follows and confirm that the pen is truly mightier than the sword.[18]

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17 George, Brito, and Weimer, "Strengthening the Profession."

18 Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *Richelieu; Or the Conspiracy: A Play in Five Acts*, 2nd ed. (London: Saunders and Otley, 1839), 39, Act 2, scene 2, https://archive.org/details/richelieuorcons00lyttgoog.

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