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INTERVIEWS

"A Learned Profession but Positioned Where the Action Is": An Interview with Rev. Dr. John W. Brinsfield

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Military Chaplaincy Review

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MCR: Dr. Brinsfield, thank you for joining us today. It is a pleasure to have this time with you. I'd like to begin by hearing a bit about how you became a chaplain and about your experiences in the Army before you became a chaplain.

John Brinsfield: When I accepted my call to the ministry as a teenager—and I was barely 14 years of age when I received that compelling call—I had not thought anything about becoming a military chaplain, even though my grandfather was a chaplain in World War I. I thought that I would just follow the normal path. I'll go to school. I'll find some money to go to seminary and college, and then when that's over, I'll be given a pastorate in a small church and just begin to relate to folks. And that will be my ministry.

But there were three mega events that took place that changed my assumed trajectory. None of which I had any control over. First, there was the Civil Rights movement and then the Vietnam War, and then a very generous set of scholarships that became available during the Vietnam War. I was able to plug into the latter, and I was swept along by the former.

So, if I may, let me begin with the Civil Rights movement, because that pulled me out of the normal process of public schools and into a military environment. In 1954, you remember that the Supreme Court of the United States—in *Brown v. Board of Education*—overturned the separate but equal

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doctrine for students in schools. And that in turn caused a number of politicians in the South to threaten to shut down the school systems in Georgia.

Now my mother was a school teacher and a school librarian in Atlanta at that time. She was not in favor of segregation. She thought every child deserved the opportunity for an education. But she also was not interested in having me hang around the house for a year while the courts decided what they were going to do. Having kids home alone sounded like a terrible idea, even if it came from the government. So, my mother sent me to a private military school in the suburbs of Atlanta, the Georgia Military Academy, which was an excellent school. We all donned West Point uniforms with gray wool trousers and coats with white cross webbing, and we carried M1 rifles while we paraded.

We did everything that they did at West Point, including giving each other demerits. When that was over—and I was fortunate to be the salutatorian in that class—I told my parents who had paid for all this, thank you so much, but I really don't want to be in ROTC anymore. I have shined so many belt buckles and so many pair of shoes and it's hot out there when you're marching and I would really rather just chill, you know, and I'll be a laid-back college student and I can do whatever laid back college students do.

My stepfather, who served for four years in World War II and was on a troop ship that went around the world, said "no, you will be in ROTC," and you have to remember they were paying for this. So, whatever. My mother and stepfather decided what was going to happen. He said, "we will have another war and when we go to war, you will do better as an officer than as an enlisted man. So, you stay in ROTC and you get your commission."

Well, I really didn't have a choice, since I valued my parents' perspective. But I was well prepared because I already had three years of military schooling. So, I enrolled in the ROTC unit at Vanderbilt University, and I stayed in that for four years. Halfway through college, in November of 1964, I enlisted in the Army Reserve. That was closer to the real Army. It was no more school stuff. I even got an enlisted reserve serial number 14906351. I weighed 165 pounds which was considered okay at the time. I was five feet six inches tall, which was short, but I could move pretty fast. The point was though, that I stayed in [the ROTC program] until I graduated; and when I graduated, I was commissioned in Army Intelligence and Security because they could not commission chaplains.

By that time, I also had a license to preach in the United Methodist Church and during the summers while I was at Vanderbilt I pastored a number of churches that were in the suburbs outside of Atlanta. Once I got in the Reserves and once I was graduated from Vanderbilt, I began to get reserve unit assignments that paid a small but important stipend.

I also had to find a seminary. At that time, I didn't have much money. So, the question was, how was I going to pay for seminary when I was lucky to pay for gasoline just to drive my car? And the answer was, I started reading bulletins from seminaries to see who gave the best scholarships. The school that had the best program was Yale Divinity School in New Haven, CT. So, I sent them transcripts, and thankfully they accepted me. I had two hundred dollars in my pocket when I left Atlanta for Yale. The first tuition bill was two thousand dollars. The point to that was, though, that all the time I was at Yale Divinity School, I was also in the Army Reserve. I went to reserve assignments during the summer because they paid extra money.

In 1969, when I graduated from seminary, I went to Fort Hamilton, NY. I went through the Chaplain Basic Course there and I finally got the MOS that I needed to become an Army chaplain. It took ten years and a lot of scrambling trying to get enough money to make it. But thanks to very nice professors and administrators in colleges and seminary I was able to do that.

As far as experiences in the Army before I became a chaplain I think I would just say that I was just temporary help. So, I would report in and perform whatever job they needed me to do.

I went on active duty in 1974.

I would say one more thing. When I was in seminary, I was only one of two divinity students that were interested in military chaplaincy. The other 398 wanted nothing to do with it. They were opposed to the Vietnam War. And they wanted to stay as far away from it as possible. I, on the other hand, didn't have much choice because I was in for the duration at that point. So, by 1969, when I became a chaplain, I had also graduated from Yale Divinity School, and I was ready to move to the next phase. Interestingly, the Army was not interested in having me go to Vietnam. They had plenty of active duty chaplains—about 1,800. So almost by accident, I had found a way to dodge the war without trying to do so.

That summer I applied for fellowships because I wanted to see if I could get another degree before I paused my formal education. It so happened that Emory University had a three-year fully funded doctoral program in historical theology, which is a fancy name for church history. And I received one of those fellowships which meant that they paid my tuition, they paid my housing on campus, and they paid for my books. And they gave me a stipend of $200.00 a month for food.

So for three years I was an Army Reservist, but I was also at Emory taking PhD courses in church history.

MCR: And so, I hear you describing your schooling and Reserve time and moving into active duty and toward active duty in 1974. But I'm very curious about how your scholarship proceeded. After you had entered active duty

and the various work you've done as a chaplain and on military chaplaincy, what was your research focused on for your PhD? What was your dissertation about?

John Brinsfield: Well, the title was "The Separation of Church and State and Colonial South Carolina during the American Revolution."[1] The series of research projects that I did in South Carolina, Georgia, and in England was about why the Americans wanted to separate church and state before the American Revolution even began.

But that was my subject and it was fascinating, and it was a lot of fun because, I got to go to Charleston, South Carolina, too—which is gorgeous—and go through their libraries. My research came in handy later when we started looking at how the chaplaincy evolved, because, as you know, it began during the American Revolution when the Second Continental Congress voted to pay chaplains $20.00 a month. And in my experience, $20.00 a month would have been fine for them. The buying power of $20 in 1775 would equal $400 in today's currency. With bread costing $1.00 a loaf back then, $400 was a fair wage.

MCR: Fascinating. But at the time, even though you were working as a chaplain in the Army Reserve you hadn't really sort of connected your research focus and your professional focus as a clergyperson or had those things been connected for you?

John Brinsfield: Well, history was very important to the Chaplain Corps. And even in my first tour of duty—which was at Fort Bliss, Texas in 1974—I wrote an article for the *Military Chaplain's Review*. It was on Revolutionary War chaplains, and it was accepted and passed along to Chaplain Gerhard Hyatt, who was the Chief of Chaplains at the time, who wrote a nice note.[2]

The Army was interested in whatever the Chaplain Corps did in the past, and I think the Army is always interested in history because it tells you what the possibilities are, and it also tells you what did not work. And those are of secular interest. I mean they don't want to have programs that don't work and there have been several. So that's why I was able to link, a little bit anyway, my dissertation with my active duty time.

MCR: That's quite a phrase you use, "history tells you what the possibilities are."

Do you mind talking a little bit more about that?

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1 John W. Brinsfield, "The Separation of Church and State and Colonial South Carolina during the American Revolution" (PhD diss., Emory University, 1973).

2 See John W. Brinsfield, "Those Doughty Chaplains of the American Revolution, Revisited," *Military Chaplains' Review* (Summer 1974): 35-38.

John Brinsfield: Sure. The Army is constantly changing and it's constantly reinventing itself and because of that, they look backward at things as well as forward. Each of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff have looked back as well as forward to see what has been done in the past. And consequently, when you find a program that worked well for a little while then the question is, is that a possibility for the future?

For many years, we did not have families in the Army except for relatively high-ranking officers. There were families involved on posts back in the cavalry days, but no soldier of low rank was authorized to bring a spouse with him on duty. Soldiers that were drafted into the Army in World War II left their families at home. There was no family housing on the post, so one of the big questions that came about in the transition to the all-volunteer Army in the 1970s was, is it possible for us to house Army families on posts?

Army commanders and planners had to go back and look at previous experiments. And they decided that not only could high-ranking officers have families, but soldiers in general could. But what they did wrong, I think at that time and corrected later, was that they gave low-ranking enlisted soldiers, a housing allowance that barely covered living in very low rent housing, but by looking backward, then they could say that that was a possibility so they could increase the housing allowance.

That's just one example. Another one is should we require West Point cadets to go to chapel? Should women be allowed in combat units? Each one of these required some examination. In the past, how have women performed? Will they perform as well now as we hope? And when they went back and looked at what women did on battlefields, ever since the Civil War, they decided, yes, we can gamble on that. But history has played a role in decision making. That's the point.

MCR: What was the Army and the Chaplain Corps like when you first entered active duty? Did your time include work with draftees and Vietnam Veterans?

John Brinsfield: When I came on duty, the Army had just transitioned to an all-volunteer force. And that was sort of a problem because there were a large number of Vietnam veterans who were still on duty because their tour had not run out. But they saw no reason why they should be on active duty. All they wanted to do was to go home.

On my first active-duty tour with the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment at Fort Bliss, Texas, I had 500 counselees the first year. That was the equivalent of a battalion that marched through my office. And they basically all wanted to get out of the Army. I remember one soldier wanted to plead that he was a conscientious objector and that he couldn't bear arms anymore. Well, when

I looked at his service record, he had a bronze star from heroism in Vietnam. So, it was going to be hard for him to argue that he was a pacifist since he had not been before.

We also had people who wound up in the Juarez, Mexico, jail because they crossed over the line into Mexico and forgot to come back on time. Then there were those who got in trouble with the Mexican police, usually over recreational drugs. We chaplains would have to go down to the Mexican jail and bail them out and bring them back. Chaplain Henry Wake, who was senior to me and a good friend, took me on an orientation tour of the jail.

I remember one young soldier who was in that Juarez jail. He could not have been more than 19. He was literally crying because he wanted to go home. He had been in a cell with about five or six other guys. The police put a bucket of milk in the cell with a loaf of bread floating in it, and that was their meal. The strongest guy got the bread and the rest of them just got a drink of milk. That was kind of the environment that I found at the end of the Vietnam War and the beginning of the all-volunteer Army.

Now the Third Armored Cavalry itself was a great regiment. The majority of the officers did a fine job. They were all Vietnam veterans and most had been in combat. They were leaders. This was a combat unit, so it was tough.

The regimental Adjutant, who was my boss, carried a loaded .45 pistol on his hip all the time. And every once in a while, when he got excited, he'd pull it out and wave it around and tell people he wanted them to shape up or get the hell out. Almost everyone shaped up.

There were no first names. Everybody was known by their last name, by their function or by their rank. So, I was either chaplain or Brinsfield or captain, one of those. There was no buddy-buddy system between senior officers and junior officers. And there were no excuses. If you were given a job, you got it done. It may not be pretty, but it got done. So that was the general environment that I recall was there.

And of course, there were no women in the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment in 1974. Not because they couldn't do the job, but because Congress wasn't ready yet to put women in combat units. They waited for quite a while to overcome the idea. Yeah, that woman should not fight and should not be wounded. That's what they were really worried about. They didn't want to have a bunch of ladies shot up. But they overcame that eventually.

There was another major step forward and that was in 1974 when our Chief of Chaplains, Chaplain Gerhart Hyatt, decided that the Army needed more ethics instruction from chaplains. We had too many ethical problems and we needed more ethics teachers, so he assigned 14 chaplains to teach ethics at Army Service schools, the Infantry school, the Artillery school, the Armor school, all of them. And that seemed to have made a difference.

A little bit later on, I became one of those 14. Chaplain Joe Beasley was already at West Point teaching ethics. Chaplain Charles Creedy was at the Army War College, and I followed both so that we had continuity for several years. So from 1974 to the present, chaplains have had a major job in teaching ethics and the laws of land warfare.

There was some argument that they didn't want to mix church and state. They didn't want soldiers to feel like they had to be religious to be on duty or to follow the law. But chaplains, again, are among the two oldest ethical professions in the Army, the chaplains and the lawyers, the law and the gospel. And when they wanted somebody to teach something like ethics, then they could call on us. The lawyers were few and far between. Maybe two or three per post, but there was a chaplain in every unit. So, you just got the best chaplain you could get and he or she would teach ethics.

MCR: What led you to become a historian and how did that relate to your work in the Chaplain Corps?

Well, I had been studying history for many before I came on duty, but I also have to say that growing up in Atlanta was a very interesting experience because Atlanta was a very historic city. You knew if you took a ride through Atlanta, you would see historic buildings and cemeteries.

But I had a degree in history, and I wanted to use it in the Army because it appeared I was going to be in the Army for a while. So, I volunteered to teach history after duty hours when I was in El Paso. I taught one semester of American history for the El Paso Community College and another for the University of Texas at El Paso just to keep current with history itself.

I also gave every new member in the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment a lecture on the history of the 3rd Cavalry. I wrote articles for the post newspaper and when I deployed to Turkey, I taught an evening course in world history for the military police in Turkey. When I was stationed in Fort Rucker, I taught the History of World Religions for Embry Riddle Aeronautical University. In other words, every chance I got, I took a job teaching or giving lectures on history. And I know it probably marks a person as a fanatic, but that was the one gift I had that I could give wherever I went because everybody's got a history and it's just a matter of looking it up.

And then in 1980, I was assigned to the History department at West Point. And while I was there, I got a second doctorate from Drew University. And it was largely centered on how you teach history and world religions since I taught both at West Point. And then finally, in 1995, I was assigned to the Army War College where I taught both ethics and history, and the common core to the students there for four years.

During that time, I got probably the most interesting assignment I had in the Army to that time. I was assigned by Chaplain Don Shea, the Chief of Chaplains, to write a history of the Chaplain Corps from 1975 to 1995. Our chaplain histories had stopped with the Vietnam War. Now Chaplain Shea wanted the next 20 years covered. And that would have taken him right up to the date when I was there.

I interviewed eight Chiefs of Chaplains: Chaplain Orris Kelly, Chaplain Kermit Johnson, Chaplain Pat Hessian, Chaplain Norris Einertson, Chaplain Matthew Zimmerman, Chaplain Don Shea, Chaplain David Hicks, and Chaplain Doug Carver. I had transcripts recorded for each of those interviews, their testimonies, if you will, about what was central to the Chaplain Corps. But beyond that, I went to a number of places, including Hawaii and Korea and West Germany, and other places to talk to chaplains who are on site. I asked them what are you doing? What works? What doesn't work? What are the good paradigms? What can we learn from history to apply now? What should we continue and what should we stop?

So I think that is what led me to be a historian, and that's how it was integrated into my role.

I was already a historian when I came into the Army. That's the short answer.

MCR: You mentioned that anywhere you go, everything and everyone has a history. You've already started to talk about how, as a historian, you were assigned by the Chief of Chaplains in 1995 to continue to write that history for the Army Chaplain Corps. What does it mean for chaplains and military chaplaincy to be something informed by history, how that history is told, the kinds of sources and perspectives and so forth that inform how you understand military chaplaincy as something with a history?

John Brinsfield: How much time have you got?

MCR: We've still got time.

John Brinsfield: Well, you have to remember that there are partners looking over your shoulder in the Chaplain Corps. The partners are the denominations that endorse and send clergy to serve as chaplains. So, when you're talking about having a history, each chaplain is bringing in historical understandings of their own faith and how it can be applied to soldiers in the Army. That's very important because if you abandon your denominational identity, then you better find another endorsing agent because your time as a fill in the blank—Presbyterian, United Methodist, Southern Baptist, or whatever—is over. And now you're going to be a "general Protestant" somewhere. So, your understanding of your job requires not only allegiance to the military and trying to figure out what they need, but also your allegiance to the doctrine and to the position of your denomination so that they will continue to endorse you.

Chaplains have four endorsements: one by their calling, one by their denomination, one by the Army, and one by their families. Betraying any one of those four can cast you adrift. So you have to remember to be faithful, in other words.

Alright, so when you talk about understanding the military chaplaincy as something with a history. That history has largely involved the Army trying to figure out why they need chaplains. If you go back and read about the very beginnings of the chaplaincy, there were 218 chaplains in the American Revolution. Twenty-five, if my memory is good, were casualties, which was the highest casualty rate in any of America's wars for chaplains. But when the war was over, only one was left on duty. Everybody else went home. That was not unusual for a number of wars after the Civil War. There were over 3,000 Union Army chaplains. And then when it was over, there were just 35 left. The reason for that was that clergy didn't really see the Army as a career on the one hand, and Congress only funded a bare minimum of Army chaplains after 1866 on the other.

The Army chaplaincy was a temporary response to emergencies that called for patriotic clergy to step up. In subsequent history, chaplains had to figure out how they could recruit enough qualified clergy persons to meet the needs of the Army. That's really what the struggle was about until 1974 when increased salaries allowed chaplains to consider career possibilities. I had chaplains like Chaplain Parker Thompson—who was my predecessor, the first Army Chaplain Corps historian, a veteran of Korea and Vietnam with purple hearts for both of those wars—and he told me during an interview at his house in Winchester, Virgina that in his time nobody thought about making the chaplaincy a career. There were only a few chaplains that didn't have a better job with their denomination, who decided to remain, and that's the hard truth.

But if they had a better chance at their church, they'd go take it because the Army was not a place where you had a stable congregation. People move, and so you don't have the continuity in the Army that you would in a civilian church where you have several generations of people.

So anyway, Chaplain Parker Thompson told me that at the end of the Korean War there were actually recruiters out from the chief's office, colonels if you will. They were saying, hey, guys, who wants to remain in the regular army? You know you can do that now. We can take you. And Chaplain Thompson said very, very few people wanted to do that. They wanted to go home. And even if they were bachelors, like the Roman Catholic chaplains, they still had families, they had cousins, they had nephews, they had sisters, they had brothers. They didn't get to see them and they wanted to.

For years, the question was how can we have a stable chaplaincy that is an essential part of the Army? That eventually got resolved, but I think it was to be honest only because the all-volunteer force enlarged the salaries enormously. I went from $500 a month at Fort Bliss, TX to maybe $1000 a month shortly thereafter. I think you can prove that if you look at the pay schedules, it was really incredible.

So, the history of the chaplaincy was not just how can we do baptisms better? How can we do wedding services better? How can we do burials better? But how can we justify our existence in the Army? That's what our history was about for a long time especially at Department of the Army level.

How do you do that? Well, it's you say you know what, during the Civil War we had four chaplains who received the Medal of Honor. In Vietnam, we had two chaplains who received the Medal of Honor. You convince the commanders that the chaplains are up front working with the soldiers, encouraging the soldiers. And not just sitting back running chapels. And if you can do that, if that's true, then the chaplains will have a place at the table. Not just for combat ministries, but for drug and health, drug and alcohol abuse prevention, family life stability, all kinds of things. Whatever it takes to strengthen the soldier, because after all, the job of the army is to win America's wars. Not anything else. And the job of the chaplaincy is to strengthen the soldiers.

MCR: Thanks for drawing that out a bit. And I think your firsthand accounts and insight around thinking about the nature of chaplaincy mirroring that of the rest of the Army, meaning, if the Army is primarily a place that is constituted in a moment of emergency and then dissolved at the end of that emergency, the sort of ebbs and flows of that within the context of the Chaplain Corps track along with the ebbs and flows of that for the for the rest of the Army.

John Brinsfield: Yes.

MCR: The firsthand accounts about what happened at the end of the Korean War and then with the transition to the all-volunteer forces are enormously instructive, especially around your own experience of going from an active-duty salary of $500 to $1000. That is hugely helpful for thinking about how military chaplaincy becomes a career when before people were thinking I can just go back to my church and that's actually the more stable place to continue to live out my call. Not just because of the sort of ebbs and flows of the citizen-soldier model of an army constituted in an emergency, but also because you can't actually make a life if you were to stay on active duty.

John Brinsfield: Yes. And, in addition, some denominations got tired of having young ministers report to the Army and make $1000 a month when others couldn't make that much at home in a small church. So, the denominations started making it difficult for young ministers to become military chaplains.

And in my denomination, if you signed up for a for a three-year tour, and you tried to come back to your home denomination when your tour was complete, then you started over just like you had just graduated from seminary. You didn't have any credit for local civilian ministry, so you didn't get a bigger church. You had to start over. And it didn't matter how many years you were in the Army or Navy or Air Force as a chaplain, one or twenty one, when you came back home you had to start over from scratch.

And a lot of guys, you know, by the time they were 30 years old, if they stayed in that long, they had a family. To go back to a small church was hard. They couldn't afford it. But often there was no other place to go. So, they stayed in the military until they could retire with a salary. There were several of those cases; I don't know how many chaplains wound up in that situation.

You asked me what the significance of understanding the military chaplaincy as something with a history might be. First of all, consider the benefits of an admirable history. It instills pride in a unit when you join a famous unit. If you're in the 101st Airborne, you know a premiere World War II unit. Now you're a member and you're going to be a member for life. You're a member of the 82nd Airborne. You're a member of the 3rd Cavalry Regiment. It instills pride in the unit. An honorable history also helps with recruitment. Other people want to join.

History justifies support from a higher echelons and can help you interface with civilian denominations. For example, if the Chief of Chaplains has a problem getting a Roman Catholic priest on duty, he might send a Catholic chaplain to his Bishop and argue that we need another priest because we have more Catholics on in the Army than we have Protestants. By the year 1984, when I left West Point, the Army was 51% Roman Catholic with just 17% of the Chaplain Corps identified as Roman Catholic clergy. I don't know if that percentage held up later, but that's why we needed Catholic chaplains. If we have a good history of working together, especially with higher echelon clergy, everything is easier.

MCR: You've started to allude to one of the major shifts early in your career from being a draft Army to the all-volunteer force. Maybe you can expand on that or note some other major shifts from early in your career to the end. That alone seems to account for so much, but what else? What other things have you seen between beginning and end that you know can help illuminate that period?

John Brinsfield: I have four: the all-volunteer Army, the introduction of women into Army combat units, the reserve components assuming a direct combat role in Iraq, and new technology. Let's start with the all-volunteer force.

An all-volunteer Army sounds good, but then you have to ask the question, who's volunteering to go on duty when a whole bunch of people just left? The answer was generally those folks that could not get a good education or had an unstable or low paying job. You could talk them into joining the military. That is not to cast aspersions on any of the soldiers, but it's just a fact that their backgrounds were such that they needed help, and the Army was terrific in terms of taking a person who needed education and then putting him or her through training programs. The soldiers, with a few exceptions, came out much more confident and much more capable than when they entered the Army.

So, the all-volunteer Army had good and unintended benefits, I think. One thing that I never understood, though, was how Congress could afford to pay for an all-volunteer force. Because the costs went sky high to pay for everybody's salaries and housing and childcare and all kinds of stuff that became immediately available in the military.

You know, we had some of the most attractive golf courses in the country on military bases and that was because of all-volunteer Army. We had to take care of everybody. Bowling alleys multiplied. We had all kinds of restaurants that opened. They were short order, but they were still good. So, we made life a lot better for service members, but it took a ton of money. It was interesting to me that Congress preferred to pass those funding bills rather than to reinstitute the draft. They were scared to death if they ran on a ticket reinstituting the draft, they'd lose an election. That's the way we felt at the time.

Women in the Army combat units was another revolutionary step. There was not only the question of whether the women could do the job. Yes, they could. We had graduates of West Point who were women, who were Rangers and could climb a cliff as well as anybody else, if not better. But the question was what they were going to do that might pose a competitive challenge to the men in the Army. If you introduce a woman who is really talented into the military, then would the male soldiers accept them? Men did not want to compete against women because they thought women would get preferential treatment.

I had a situation like that as a chaplain when I was teaching at the Warrant Officer Career College at Fort Rucker, Alabama. A woman was introduced to the faculty, and the guys didn't want to talk to her or especially help her. I went to the commander and told him if we didn't take care of her, she would leave. The commander called everybody in and reminded us that we were all

equal members of one team. We must be prepared to support and help one another accomplish legitimate missions. He told us that if anyone did not feel that way, then he could find another job for that person in a distant unit as soon as the paperwork could be finished. Think about it.

Just like chaplains, women were accepted in the Army because of their performance. They had to earn it, but they did. And then we got fighter pilots, and we got all kind of people who were women, but they still carried on.

Reserve components assuming a direct combat role was yet another transformation. That was a surprise to me because in 1991 I was already back from Operation Desert Storm. In the invasion of Iraq, we had Reserve units who were going into a direct combat role and the regular Army units were providing support. And that continues to this day. So having been a Reservist for ten years, I knew that I was not prepared and my unit wasn't prepared to take on the Taliban in the mountains like the regulars from the 10th Mountain Division did. But the Army decided that's the way they wanted to go. I never heard much of a rationale for it. It just happened, but we survived. The Reservists stepped up. They were trained, they went in. They did their job, but they also left with more casualties than they expected.

Finally, we had a technology revolution. You asked me what the difference was between the Army of 1974 and that of 2011. One of those paradigm shifts was technology, and it didn't start with drones. It started with computers.

After I served in Desert Storm, I came back to Fort McPherson in Atlanta, and I was the Personnel Chaplain for U.S. Forces Command (which had command authority over Army combat units on CONUS installations). I had never used a computer. I had to ask one of the secretaries, "If I'm typing and I want to go back to the left how do I get there? Because every time I hit enter, it drops down a line. Doesn't work. Is my computer broken?" And she said, "No, sir, you just keep typing and it'll go down there by itself." So I got interested in what else does it might do by itself so I wouldn't get caught by surprise. That literally happened. Some of us old guys really did not understand the speed and ease the technology offered in the Army.

Drones, for example, now have taken the place of armor. We used to base everything in World War II on armor. You won the battle, if you had enough tanks. So, you needed armor. In Operation Desert Storm, we had a big tank battle in the desert. That was the last time they used tanks to influence a battle. Now we've got drones flying over. Not only taking pictures, but bombing. And of course, Ukraine and Russia are cashing in on that, sadly. So those are some of the technological and personnel differences.

What remained constant? Since the job of the chaplaincy is to provide spiritual and moral support to soldiers, and their families and allies as required, by providing worship services across a wide spectrum of faith

groups and by direct personal delivery of religious support as needed in hospitals, aid stations, POW camps and disaster reliefs. I don't think the job of the chaplain will be affected by drones or other technology to the extent that other parts of the Army have. We are essentially a humanistic part of the Army, which some senior leaders still don't understand.

MCR: Yeah, that's great. Appreciate your insights around those shifts, John. And of course, moving forward, AI is you know beyond the horizon of the drone question, the role of AI and how that impacts what you were just saying as far as the human element and to what extent senior leaders will understand that I think is still an open question.

John Brinsfield: Yes.

MCR: But we'll move forward to how you understand the role of professional and academic writing and research in the course of your work as a chaplain and among the work of chaplains more broadly. How did that unfold for you and how you saw yourself as part of the profession and your responsibility within it? Of course, you came in already as a scholar, and so perhaps had a deeper sense of that conversation or a sense of responsibility to it. But how do you see that as a broader responsibility for chaplains as professionals who are part of a broader professional conversation on chaplaincy.

John Brinsfield: In my time at West Point, I met Don Snider, who was a professor in the Social Sciences department, and he edited this book, which is called *The Future of the Army Profession*.[3] It's an anthology of reflections on professional writing and on the profession of the military officer. Professor Snider said that a profession should have a knowledge and expertise base that can be applied to new situations.

In other words, chaplains must be knowledgeable about what is happening so they can apply their own values to the Army. They have to know, what is the Army doing? What do the soldiers need? The next thing a profession does in addition to having a knowledge base is to have ethical standards. Doctors have ethics. Lawyers have ethics, and Army officers should have ethics. And that's another reason the Chaplain Corps got involved with ethical instruction.

Generally speaking, a profession includes a commitment for an extended period of time. It may not be for life, but it would be for enough time to develop a significant contribution. A profession has a commitment to excellence. And that's really important to me because anybody can write something and submit it, but you're looking for excellence and you find a true professional, that's somebody who wants to be sure that they keep editing

3 Don M. Snider and Gayle L. Watkins, eds., *The Future of the Army Profession* (McGraw-Hill Primis Custom, 2002).

until they get the best product. That's why I'm talking to two professionals this morning. Because you both know what it is to edit until you get to the product that you want.

Finally, the profession that Professor Snider talked about has to meet a need. There has to be a social or organizational need for that profession. If you don't need a dentist, there's no point in having one. If you don't need a historian, then there's no point in having one. Professor James Burke at Texas A&M said that a profession is a relatively high-status occupation, whose members apply abstract knowledge to solve problems. Well, that's okay, but I can use the same definition that he gives for an engineer. An engineer solves problems. He has standard of ethics and everything else.

But as far as the chaplain profession is concerned, it is the responsibility of chaplains to understand the complex challenges and issues in our time and how we may bring our spiritual values to bear successfully in that context if we wish to be relevant for the next decade.

So, what is necessary for the chaplain profession? To do research and to understand the current environment so that we know how to minister. So you say, give me an example. Sure. You walk into let's say an armor unit which is downsized. All of a sudden, you realize this unit is going away. All these guys are going to be transferred somewhere. What word of encouragement can you give him? You go to the personnel section, you say? Where are they going? And you tell them, "Don't worry about it. The Army's going to take care of you." But if you don't know what that environment is when you walk in, then you may not be delivering a message that anybody cares about.

Now, why did the Army have professionals? General Eric Shinseki was Chief of Staff of the Army in 1999, said that the Army's under constant transformation. That's the first thing that the chaplain has to know in order to evaluate the context of ministry. Transformation is driven by technology, tactics, and socio-political change. OK. So we're all concerned with change. We knew that. But then the question is, what can we do to perform effective ministry in an environment where transformation is being generated by AI, other technologies, or socio-political forces. Whatever the change is, we have to understand it to know how we can use it. And if we don't, we'll fall behind.

We'll be asking people like I did the computer staff at Forces Command, "What is this technology and what is worth? How can I use it?" The responsibility of chaplains is to understand the complex of challenges and issues, and to know how we can bring our knowledge and experience to bear for the benefit of the soldiers.

MCR: Thanks for laying that all out in that very clear way around those connections between what a profession is more broadly, and how that ties into the work of chaplaincy in particular and how chaplains as professionals

bring to bear their knowledge and expertise in the context of continuous transformation, complex challenges and issues. And thinking, especially in the context of those socio-political changes that you referenced, I think that moves us well into our last set of questions around the current moment and what you might hope for chaplains in the future? And what might you fear? We're in a moment of transformation and change. The directive around removing rank just came out last week, I believe, and the number of faith and belief codes is changing among other things.

John Brinsfield: Yes.

MCR: That has occurred recently and military chaplaincy has become a sort of focus in a way that it hasn't really been in the recent past at the highest levels. I'd really love to hear your thoughts on what your hopes are in the midst of this current moment and the role of chaplains as professionals as they meet it, and what you might be concerned for.

John Brinsfield: You said, what are your hopes for the work of military chaplains in the current moment? Well, I hope that we continue to get the respect from colleagues and constituents and the motivation to serve soldiers anywhere, anytime, if needed. I would hope for collegiality between and, among other chaplains and officers. And I would hope that we don't forget that we have a love of country and that we have to care for the Army family. And if we have those we can focus on soldier ministry, which is what the Army expects.

It doesn't matter what exact rank our leaders have as long as they can lead the Chaplain Corps. Our first four Chiefs of Chaplains from 1920 to 1937 were all Colonels. It doesn't matter if there's disagreement about denominational doctrine. What matters is whether chaplains are giving proper focus to soldier ministries because it's the soldier that counts. That's what our professionalism is for. Moreover, if our plans and programs are soldier-focused, when the Army downsizes, as it does, the last funds to be cut will be those reserved for soldier ministries.

I hope we continue to be a learned profession but positioned where the action is. Chaplains have been instructors in service schools, especially ethics instructors, discussing with soldiers everything from venereal disease prevention to race relations and getting along with soldiers of diverse backgrounds. Chaplains served until World War II as defense attorneys, as counselors for marriages, and as drug and alcohol abuse instructors. In fact, chaplains have been part of the ethical, moral and spiritual glue that holds the Army together from the commanders all the way to the lowest private.

Captain Parker Thompson that I mentioned before told me one time that the chaplain's place is where the action is. The action with soldiers. He always moved toward the guns when he was in Korea or in Vietnam. He got home with two purple hearts and with the love and affection of thousands

of soldiers. Chaplain Sam Boone likewise volunteered for multiple tours in Korea. Sam baptized over 100 Korean soldiers on one day, which showed that chaplains have care not only for our soldiers but for our allies; and he did it in a very dramatic way. Chaplains will continue to look after one another. And they'll have to if they go where the action is.

The US Army Chaplain Corps Regimental Association maintains a roster of chaplains who pass away each year. So does the Military Chaplains Association. Having worked with those colleagues, I can tell you that it's quite moving when we put 100 chaplains a year to rest. We keep a list of all of those chaplains who ministered to soldiers in peacetime and during America's wars. And I'm very proud of them because they did a good job. If we look at the monument outside the Institute for Religious Leadership at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, it lists more than 400 chaplains and chaplain assistants who have given their lives for the men and women they serve.

That is the constant—if chaplains are serving soldiers, the Chaplain Corps will be all right, no matter what the political climate happens to be.

What are my fears? I have two.

I am very concerned about the politicalization of military chaplaincy—that the boundaries between church and state are currently being ignored by our Department of Defense leadership. The boundaries are being challenged because some of our national leaders believe that they not only have temporal power to make changes in personnel and logistics and all the other things that influence the performance of the Army, but they also have the power to make changes that would influence the spiritual life of the people. In other words, they seem to believe that they, because of their position in the government, are also spiritual leaders and should be recognized as such. That is, in the main, a false belief. Free exercise of religion, with individual choice, is one of the founding principles of our democracy, and it must be preserved.

But what I'm afraid of as well is that the denominations that send chaplains to the military will continue to fragment. My own denomination, which used to be the second largest Protestant church in America, has split. Now there's a United Methodist Church and there's a Global Methodist Church. And there are a whole bunch of people who were former Methodists attending other community churches.

Freedom of choice, freedom of religion is important, but it's also important for the denominations to reach stable ground so that they can continue. As long as they're fighting over the authority of scripture versus inclusiveness, or the place of women in ministry, then they won't be able to support the country or the Army when asked.

One example is that the second biggest denomination in the country, the United Methodist Church, has had trouble sending its quota of chaplain candidates to the military. Because they don't allow their chaplain candidates to go from seminary into the Army. They require two years of pastoral work after graduation.

Some denominations have had trouble sending volunteer chaplain candidates to the military because they don't allow their chaplain candidates to go from seminaries into the Army.

But what this does is it takes them out of the pool of immediately available people. If we had a national emergency and needed a thousand new chaplains to train as we did in World War I and II, I wonder if the churches could provide them? If there's a weak link in our chain, I don't think it's in professionalism, in our historical appreciation for chaplains, or in our continued emphasis on ministry to soldiers. If there's a weak link, it might be in planning support for future chaplain requirements from the mainline denominations and faith groups for the Army, Navy and Air Force.

MCR: That's great, John. I really appreciate your time, and you clearly spent a lot of time preparing as well and so you've given us a real gift.

John Brinsfield: It's been a pleasure. God bless you and your work.

MCR: Thanks, John.

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