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Weekly Newsgram - January 30th 2019

Military chaplains who died together had to be scared, Baptist naval officer says

Jeff Brumley Baptist News Global

Feb. 2 marks the 76th anniversary of the sinking of the SS Dorchester, a transport ship taking hundreds of troops to Greenland during World War II.

Among the 672 who died in the U-Boat attack in 1943 were four Army chaplains who, many survivors said, brought calm to the panic and who gave up their own life jackets - and lives - to others.

Now known as Four Chaplains Day, the commemoration is a reminder of the courage and trust in God still required of military chaplains today, said Lt. Cmdr. Keith Carter, a Navy chaplain ordained by the National Baptist Convention USA.

"I just hope and pray that no matter what I am asked to do by the U.S. military, that I am a bearer of God's presence," said Carter, currently serving as deputy director for plans and operations for the Navy's Chief of Chaplains.

Like other military personnel, chaplains never know when their lives will be required. And the challenges can be great even when the ultimate sacrifice is not required, Carter said. Much of the preparation comes from principles that most any minister can identify with. "I challenge myself every day to make sure I look like Christ, and you don't have to be a Christian to appreciate that," he said. "You may be Jewish, Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist - or you may not have a faith at all. But if I am living out my faith that's all that matters because I have loved you like Christ would."

Carter, 39, said he heard that very calling long before ordination in 2006 - throughout his pre-Navy career that included work as a television journalist and selling insurance. In an interview with Baptist News Global, he shared how his faith developed in depth and focus and led him to service in uniform. His comments are included here, edited for clarity.

Why did you choose the Navy over other branches of the military?

To me the Navy was the only option. I felt the sky was the limit. It offered the opportunity to preach on the flight deck of a ship and to marines about to go on a convoy, and to sailors going into dark and dangerous situations. It was attractive to me.



Did you ever deploy while serving as a chaplain to the Marines?
We went to Iraq. I can tell you that.

What do your duties entail at the Pentagon?

It is my responsibility to make sure we empower those chaplains and religious program specialists out in the fleet to do their jobs.

Is that as rewarding as being out in the fleet?

It's all rewarding. It's just a different type of ministry. It takes courage to speak out on their behalf. It requires courage to make sure I am always listening to them. It takes a certain kind of skill set to empower them. Some people love to use the term "administry."

In what ways have you seen God show up for the sailors and marines you have served - and for yourself?

I can tell you about serving on (the U.S.S.) Tortuga. While I was onboard that ship at sea, I watched as young sailors, just starting their careers, growing and developing as adults, encountered the Holy Spirit. Sailors would come to office and say "hey chaplain, have you got a minute?" As I listened to their stories, their maturity began to take over the room. You can see how the Lord was working in their lives.

Or when leading a worship service in the desert of Iraq and a guy tells you he is not a believer, but he comes to your worship service because he wants to know more about this God you are raving about. "I don't understand how you can be so happy in the midst of what we are dealing with." You can't forget about things like that.

Why is it important to remember the sacrifice of the Four Chaplains?

That is a wonderful example of being a pastor in crisis. It was about taking care of people when it's dark, when it's scary. In that moment they demonstrated courage. They demonstrated loving someone when you are, no kidding, sitting on death's door. Because they were.

When I think about their story, you know they were scared. They had to be scared. But they went through the experience together.

As a military chaplain, there are so many other men and women who are looking to you in a crisis. In some of the hairier times, I have tried to be as calm as possible. That doesn't mean I am not scared. But I have to have a trust that the Lord is going to see it through.

Executive Director Notes

The Day They Came to Tell Me My Husband Died



One of the major initiatives my last two years on active duty as the Deputy G1 of the Army was the conversation about what are the essential attributes for a leader, and of those, which is the most critical. What the Army arrived at was the key attributes of a leader needs are courage, competence and character. While we often think of physical courage, it also means moral courage, and the ability to speak truth to power when needed. With regard to competency, that seems to be self-evident, however often times competency is seen as the only really valid attribute, even if it means short changing the others. Too often this leads to looking the other way if a person can simply "get the job done" as an ends to a mean, with no regard to how others have been treated, or if there were moral shortcuts. The final attribute, character, is at the end of the day what sets apart the moral leader.

What then is the nature of the attributes of a chaplain? One thing that has stayed with me since my first quarter of clinical pastoral education is that a chaplain must not only demonstrate professional competence, and have the moral courage to speak to the needs of the patients when the patient cannot speak for herself to their

healthcare team, and that a chaplain must be grounded in their character, which has often be described as what we do when no one is looking. Within the core attribute of character is the importance of compassion. While we all want chaplains with courage and competence, how many of us would want to make a referral to a fellow chaplain whose core character does not exhibit compassion?

An article was published in the New York Times recently entitled ["The Day They Came to Tell Me My Husband Died"](#). As I read it, I became very aware that compassion is indeed a large part of what should be seen as shaping the character of a professional chaplain. I believe it is the connective tissue of chaplaincy across faith traditions. The story of the young former Army officer, who met her husband when they were both West Point cadets, has stayed with me since reading the article.

The appreciation that she has for the chaplain who was with her on what was the most tragic night of her life will, I am sure, resonate with all of us. And with that, I would now refer you to the article, and for reflection on how what we do is perceived. I also pray that this is not something that any of us should have to do on a regular basis, but when called upon, that compassion may be a clear part of our character that can be offered to those in pain, and in need of our pastoral care. I believe that you will find the article insightful in the appreciation of the newly widowed, and amazed at how she plans to incorporate compassion into her new vocation.

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[The Day They Came to Tell Me My Husband Died](#)

[Philly priest, Navy chaplain named Auxiliary Bishop](#)

[by Mark Abrams](#)



PHILADELPHIA (KYW Newsradio) - A Philadelphia priest serving nearly 20 years as a Navy chaplain won't be coming home anytime soon. He's been tapped by Pope Francis to serve as an auxiliary bishop in the Archdiocese for Military Services.

Bishop-elect Joseph Coffey has ministered to tens of thousands of sailors, Marines, and Coast Guard members and their families in a nearly 20-year Navy career that has taken him to such places as a U.S. base in Afghanistan, the Persian Gulf and the South Pacific. "Everything I did as a parish priest, I've been able to do in the military. But now I wear a uniform and wear combat boots. But it's the same work, and that's what makes it so special," he said.

Why the Navy?

"My dad was in the Navy as a doctor," Coffey said, "mostly in the reserves, and my little brother, Jim, had gone to Villanova on ROTC scholarship for the Navy and he was in the Navy at the time I went to seminary. And he told me of the great need that was out there for priests in the Navy chaplain corps." Coffey, 58, says he'll stay with Navy service and likely continue supervising chaplains in his new role.

"I've had wonderful assignments, and I've always been busy as a priest, as a Navy chaplain," Coffey said. "I really feel blessed to have the opportunity to serve in this way and try not to take even a day of it for granted."

"I've been very happy and proud to tell people around the world that I've met that I'm Philadelphia priest who happens to be serving in the Navy right now. But my heart and my intention was always to return to Philadelphia. But the Holy Father and the Lord, it seems like they have other plans for me."

Editor's Note: Chaplain Coffey is a Life Member of the MCA. We congratulate Chaplain Coffey on this new opportunity for service.

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[Position Description](#)

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