

Atheist Chaplain: “Is there room in the foxhole”?

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Maj. Brandon Candee, 1-151st Attack Reconnaissance Battalion chaplain, conducts chapel services July 9, 2017 during annual training at Fort Stewart, Georgia. (U.S. Army Photo by Chaplain Maj. Jessica Donnelly)

The U.S. Army is a dynamic organization with Soldiers as diverse as the communities they come from. As the demographics of the American fabric vary from mainstream religious identities to secular atheist, non-religious humanism identities, so do the Soldiers serving in the U.S. Army.

The need for humanist/atheist chaplains may be either real or an unfounded concern at the Army and national level. The challenge for the 21st Century noncommissioned officer is meeting the needs of the Soldier and accomplishing the mission.

In his farewell address, George Washington said,

*“Let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.”*¹

History of the Chaplaincy

Chaplains have been part of the U.S Army since the American Revolution. Colonial America was comprised of individuals fleeing religious persecution abroad and those seeking new fortunes. Religion played a major part in the lives of colonial Americans.²

As the War for Independence loomed, General George Washington saw the need for chaplains to provide for the good order and spiritual needs of the new Continental Army, and on July 29, 1775, the Continental Congress established chaplains as an integral part of the Army.³ On July 9th 1776, Washington issued a general order “allowing a chaplain to each Regiment, with the pay of Thirty-three dollars and one third a month...”⁴

Ever since, chaplains have been integral throughout the history of the United States and the U.S. Army in representing faith groups of religious Soldiers and providing guidance on religious, moral, spiritual, and cultural matters while adhering to its core mission of nurturing the living, caring for the wounded, and honoring the dead.⁵

NCOs and the 21st Century

“There are no atheists in foxholes.”⁶ Or are there?

Noncommissioned officers face an ever-evolving 21st century Army. As a large number of Soldiers enlisting in the Army identify as Christian, a growing minority are identifying as non-theistic is the need for a humanist chaplain relevant?⁷

In many nations, religion influences perceptions of power, law, and social customs on the international stage, affecting diplomatic outcomes and conduct of operations.⁸

It is the chaplain who advises the commander on religious, morale, and ethical leadership issues, including the religious needs of all personnel for whom the commander is responsible.⁹

The question then becomes, how will a non-theistic chaplain effectively advise and guide the commander while maintaining a core role in religious support operations?¹⁰

NCO Challenges

Modern NCOs confront Soldiers of every belief and persuasion, and in order to allow the commander to remain focused on the mission, they need to maintain order and discipline within the unit.

Noncommissioned officers, along with the religious affairs specialists, play instrumental roles in educating and providing appropriate resources for all soldiers regardless of background or religion. In the absence of a chaplain, the religious affairs specialist provides religious support as a staff advisor.

“We are required to provide religious support no matter the denomination and/or faith group,” Boss said.

“I believe a chaplain assistant may be uncomfortable serving as an assistant with an Atheist chaplain, but it is not something we can control,” Boss continued. “We must serve in all faiths.”¹¹

“From the purely religious affairs community, no this is not a challenge,” said Sgt. 1st Class Adam D. Ewing, religious affairs specialist with the Combined Arms Center, Training and Doctrine Command. “From the NCO Corps perspective, it is a huge challenge because without hope the chaplain provides, NCOs have no reason to refer a Soldier to a chaplain.”¹²

Noncommissioned officers of the 21st century Army need to be considerate of the desires and wants of their Soldiers and the over-arching needs of the Army. Being tolerant of both religious and non-religious Soldiers is paramount to the Army and to the needs of individual Soldiers.¹³

Once the humanist community can unify its message, and exercise tolerance and respect for the beliefs of religious Soldiers, then perhaps the Army can consider adding humanist chaplains to its ranks.

Atheists in the Foxhole or Chaplains in the Pulpit

Is there room for an atheist in a foxhole? The answer is yes, of course. Is there room for an atheist chaplain in the Army? The answer is much more complex and both religious and non-religious groups in the community muddy the discussion.

Noncommissioned officers, however, will not determine the outcome of this issue; their mission is to maintain the standards, enforce discipline, and keep personal biases out of the discussion. In the 21st Century, NCOs need to focus on accomplishing the mission, supporting their Soldiers, advising the commanders, and allowing chaplains to perform their duties.

The 21st Century and Beyond

Noncommissioned officers need to understand how to implement the principles of mission command, such as team building, trust, and understanding the commander's intent as part of unit and Soldier readiness. Soldiers should not only be physically but also mentally, financially, and "spiritually" fit. Understanding where Soldiers' motivation and inner compass point helps NCOs to more ably guide, motivate, mentor, and lead Soldiers in the 21st century Army.

It is important that today's NCOs understand that one of the most important contributions chaplains make is to the mental and moral welfare of the unit. They should also know that Soldiers may go to a chaplain of another faith if he or she is unavailable. The chaplain has to serve all members of the command regardless of religious or non-religious affiliation.¹⁴

“There is no conflict with chaplains supporting Soldiers of religious and non-religious backgrounds,” said Col. Peter Jaramillo, chaplain with Kansas Army National Guard. “If there is such a thing as an atheist chaplain, what is the impact on morale? Is it uplifting or is it detrimental to the unit and the Army?”¹⁵

Noncommissioned officers must develop a deeper understanding of the chaplain's role and if religion is or is not an influence in the lives and motivations of their Soldiers. Working with the diversity of beliefs and respecting those differences shows acceptance and builds a stronger Army.

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Notes

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