



To dominate in battle, the Army will rely on resiliency built through spirituality and the care command sergeants major and chaplains provide. They will improve resiliency, fundamental technical and tactical skills, and combat readiness through pragmatic, reliable techniques. (AI-generated image by *NCO Journal*)

# Go Where the Suffering Is

## CSMs and Chaplains Can Partner to Improve Spiritual Readiness

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**A**s our Army prepares for Large-Scale Combat Operations (LSCO), we must build resiliency and mental toughness to harden and prepare Soldiers for the realities of combat. Consider historian Drew Gilpin Faust's description of the aftermath of the battle of Gettysburg in 1863:

*"By July 4, an estimated six million pounds of human and animal carcasses lay strewn across the field in the summer heat, and a town of 2,400 grappled with 22,000 wounded who remained alive but in desperate condition."*

*(Faust, 2008, p. 69)*

Throughout history, the victor claimed the field, but with victory came the responsibility for the dead on both sides. Imagine being a Soldier on detail to clear Gettysburg, or a medic or litter bearer in the surgical tents aiding those 22,000 casualties. Food and sleep deprivation, filth, fear of death, and the loss of our closest friends are a few of the many ways Soldiers suffer during war.

In training and garrison, Soldiers wrestle with adjusting to Army life, isolation, relationship issues, and finding their place in society. It is a different type of suffering but one that causes Soldiers to overwhelm behavioral health resources, separate from the Army before their contract ends, and kill themselves.

The Army is a melting pot of society, blending cultures, beliefs, practices, and norms. Creating cohesive teams of resilient Soldiers who are masters of their warfighting craft is essential to success in combat. A strong spiritual readiness and resiliency foundation is vital for blending these individuals into teams.

The unit command sergeant major (CSM) and chaplain are key to laying this foundation. Chaplains have cared for our Soldiers since the Continental Army (Murray, 2009). NCOs have long advocated and cared for Soldiers in peace and combat, and the NCO Creed captures this responsibility (Department of the Army [DA], n.d.).

History depicts the horrors of LSCO — look at World Wars I and II, the Korean War, and the war in Ukraine. To dominate in battle, the Army will rely on resiliency built through spirituality and the care CSMs and chaplains provide. This pair will improve resiliency, fundamental technical and tactical skills, and combat readiness through pragmatic, reliable techniques.

CSMs and chaplains are the lynchpin to spiritual readiness. Together, they create a culture in which Soldiers can thrive.

### **Spirituality and Readiness**

Spirituality is an important, oft-overlooked domain of holistic health and fitness. Units often struggle to quantify the effects of spiritual readiness programs. Leaders may be uncomfortable encouraging Soldiers to

attend spiritual readiness events, fearing they will violate Soldiers' religious rights. Furthermore, the Army has hired experts who overlap in building resiliency, healthy living habits, and mitigating stress.

It's increasingly easy to overlook unit chaplains, marginalizing one of our best resources for building thriving Soldiers. Chaplains and other subject matter experts must work together for an integrated approach to building resiliency rooted in spirituality, for spirituality is central to a healthy, fulfilling life.

In the Army, spirituality is vital to building unit capability and capacity. Each Soldier should focus on purpose and hope. The U.S. Army's Holistic Health and Fitness Manual, FM-72 (DA, 2020) acknowledges, "Spiritual readiness develops the personal qualities a person needs in times of stress, hardship, and tragedy" (p. 10-1). LSCO are replete with stress, hardship, and tragedy. Training for combat and the adversities of life will produce the same. Spirituality is about combat readiness and living a fulfilling life, two things that should interest every Soldier.

FM 7-22 also asserts, "Spirituality is often described as a sense of connection that gives meaning and purpose to a person's life" (DA, 2020, p. 10-1). Purpose is a key protective factor in reducing harmful behaviors, namely suicide: Research indicates that Soldiers who have leaders who reinforce their purpose have fewer suicidal ideations (Trachik et al., 2021, para 1). More than avoiding



The Army is a melting pot of society, blending cultures, beliefs, practices, and norms. The unit command sergeant major and chaplain are key in creating cohesive teams of resilient Soldiers who are masters of their warfighting craft. (U.S. Army photo by Pfc. Devron Bost)

thoughts of ending our lives, spirituality is about thriving.

Thriving and living a meaningful life are common to all. Feeling well mentally and physically puts Soldiers in a better position to succeed. Creating an environment where Soldiers can learn, grow, and eventually flourish is our mandate as leaders.

Young adults, who comprise most of our junior ranks, are finding their way in the world and need time to learn adult skills. Available resources can accelerate this learning, but command teams must carefully bake their use into unit training plans. Proper training management practices will help organize and balance the unit's activities so Soldiers can concentrate on training without mental or organizational distractions.

Thriving Soldiers take on new challenges such as Ranger School, competing in the best Squad competition, or taking college courses. The relationship between the CSM and chaplain is vital at the intersection of training for life and training for combat.

CSMs' and chaplains' unique skills amplify when combined. They must forge a relationship early and work together to create a unit culture where Soldiers can thrive. They must collaborate and support each other as they develop programs to help Soldiers, root out and correct friction within the formation, shape training, and advise commanders on Soldier issues and morale.

If the environment is not conducive to thriving and mastering warfighting skills in the garrison, the environment will not improve in combat. LSCO promises suffering and casualties. Where there is suffering, there should be a leader and, when possible, a chaplain or CSM.

As an Army, we rightfully focus on warfighting and transformation but not much on handling the psychological effects of combat. In modern conflict, we haven't seen the casualties and deprivation Ukraine is experiencing. CSMs and chaplains will hold our Army together when we next experience combat's horrors. They must understand what it takes to help Soldiers thrive as they prepare for war.

### Practical Advice for CSMs

As the most experienced NCOs in the formation, CSMs profoundly impact their Soldiers and can often detect problems before they arise. Additionally, they understand the links between organizations, allowing them to streamline and optimize systems and processes.

CSMs are some of the Army's premier trainers and are often combat veterans. They understand their organizations' current affairs and can steer the formation or inform the enterprise of additional help, resources, or adjustments needed.

While CSMs can have tremendous impacts alone, their effects amplify when supported by chaplains. The burden of building the relationship lies with the CSM, but the CSM's confidence and coaching will significantly

affect the chaplain's influence.

Selection as a CSM is exciting, and the transition into the organization is a whirlwind. It's easy to prioritize other areas before focusing on spiritual readiness and forming a relationship with the chaplain. However, establishing a battle rhythm for regularly collaborating is effective and necessary. Training and educating new chaplains takes time, but it's essential for the organization.

Most newly appointed chaplains have terrific people skills and understand the resources across the installation and community. They are often excellent counselors but sometimes lack Army experience and an understanding of how organizations run, including basic customs and courtesies or how to help Soldiers professionally.

Savvy CSMs will invest in developing their chaplains and steer them toward solving problems. As chaplains' experience and comfort grow, CSMs can include them in increasingly demanding projects. Eventually, chaplains can provide insight from the formation, sound advice, and — frankly — look after CSMs as few people can. CSMs can then tackle problems chaplains identify, knocking down bureaucracy (as CSMs are best postured to do).

When possible, the CSM-chaplain relationship must start and become effective in the garrison. There, CSMs must create Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to



Capt. Joel Black, 382nd Military Police Battalion chaplain, 200th Military Police Command, leads a notional hasty memorial service for Soldiers of the 1367th Military Police Company Aug. 18, 2023, at Fort McCoy, Wisconsin. Chaplains and command sergeants major must adapt their memorial standard operating procedures to battlefield constraints, ensuring dignified treatment of the fallen. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Ryan Rayno)



Lt. Col. Jim D. Keirsey (right), commander of 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade, walks with Command Sgt. Maj. Wayne W. Wahlenmeier (center) and Capt. John P. McDougall (left), unit chaplain, in Postojna, Slovenia, July 24, 2017. CSMs' and chaplains' unique skills amplify when combined. They must collaborate and support each other as they develop programs to help Soldiers, root out and correct friction within the formation, shape training, and advise commanders on Soldier issues and morale. (U.S. Army photo by Davide Dalla Massara)

ensure proper reception and onboarding for new Soldiers. In-processing should include meeting the chaplain.

Additionally, CSMs should consider a spiritual wellness screening or look at how organizations can use a screening provided by their higher headquarters. CSMs usually are privy to published Morale, Welfare, and Recreation (MWR) activities and last-second opportunities. Building Strong and Ready Teams (BSRT) and MWR events should not be reserved for struggling Soldiers but shared with thriving Soldiers.

Foundations day or other periodic stand-down training days are great places for spiritual readiness training. CSMs should review these topics or format them for briefing during training meetings.

Finally, the chaplain is an excellent counterweight to the CSM's experience. Smart CSMs usually confer with their chaplain before making big decisions or advising their commanders. Developing the chaplain during garrison operations is essential but must be extended to tactical operations as well. There are practical techniques for training and involving chaplains in the field.

CSMs typically spend much time in the field overseeing training. Including the chaplain or creating opportunities for them beyond providing field services is vital. As CSMs circulate the battlefield to check on Soldiers and operations, inviting chaplains to travel with them is prudent. They lack the same access and often the wherewithal to be at the right place at the right time to

impact Soldiers' spiritual well-being.

CSMs tend to move to friction points where stress will be high and Soldiers will suffer. While they assess and address combat operations, chaplains counsel, evaluate and improve morale, and provide religious services.

When casualty estimates are high, CSMs are key in planning medical evacuation, treatment, and asset placement — including advising where the chaplain can best impact the operation. Chaplains can only be effective if CSMs push to include them in medical training.

The chaplain's assistant must also possess small unit tactics training. In combat, it's crucial for CSMs to regularly visit the support area to correct logistics issues, check on the wounded, and speak to and assess replacement Soldier readiness.

Bringing the chaplain creates efficiency and allows chaplains to restock on needed resources, such as providing for the free exercise of each Soldier's faith. The collaborative relationship between the CSM and the chaplain allows Soldiers to flourish.

### **Practical Advice for Chaplains**

Chaplains primarily focus on three capabilities:

- Nurturing the living
- Caring for the wounded
- Honoring the fallen

They can greatly help Soldiers if they are active and creative in improving spiritual readiness and morale.

With countless methods available, only a chaplain's imagination limits the possibilities. However, there are some tried-and-true techniques.

Chaplains are not simply practitioners of their faith but also staff officers. Spending time with the S3 learning the operations process and how they integrate with the battle staff is essential to their effectiveness and credibility.

During unit onboarding, chaplains should be ready to present relevant information to tie Soldiers into available spiritual readiness resources and events. This interaction is counterproductive if it's a haphazard meeting. Chaplains must have a plan for the spiritual readiness assessment. The invaluable evaluation often uncovers high-risk Soldiers early on.

The decisive advantage chaplains have over many Army experts is their presence within the formation. Shared hardship and suffering create cohesion and bonding. A chaplain who conducts physical training (PT) with the formation, attends field exercises, and works in the hot motor pool will bond with Soldiers and better understand their issues when advising the commander.

This regular interaction allows them to sense counterproductive leaders and assess baseline morale and the units' culture. It also allows them to understand how to approach their important suicide prevention role. A chaplain's prime directive should be to go where the suffering is. This approach keeps them busy with meaningful work in combat, training, or life.

Clinical psychologist and Operation Iraqi Freedom veteran Dr. Craig Bryan suggests in his book *Rethinking Suicide* that suicidal ideation is an expression of pain (Bryan, 2021).

For chaplains, a Soldier just raised their hand and said they are suffering. This alert should immediately prompt them to move to help the individual, offer the company command team support, and coordinate and track follow-on care.

Chaplains at all echelons must be on the Commander's Critical Information Requirements (CCIR) distribution lists to promptly react to these situations and other challenging events. The suffering Soldiers should be tracked at regular unit wellness meetings that chaplains attend and have informed opinions on their progress and way forward.

Isolation causes suffering, and the barracks is often an isolating place. Chaplains must maintain a presence there and find ways to extend spirituality and improve morale where Soldiers live.

Potluck meals are always a hit with Soldiers. Organizing game nights, barracks religious services, or just talking to Soldiers are tangible actions that help. Understanding activities and events available through Better Opportunities for Single Soldiers and the MWR department can prevent isolation. Chaplains must be experts in understanding the resources offered by the

installation and the community.

The Army and the communities surrounding the installation have many resources to help Soldiers and their families. Chaplains should look for resource guides and work to catalog the most needed resources.

Building relationships with local charities, food banks, and veterans' groups can arm chaplains with helpful resources in many situations. Organized chaplains can access resources through the chapel — such as Operation Helping Hands gift cards for food, the Family Life Chaplain for counseling, or BSRT programs. The most obvious resource is the chapel itself and the other chaplains within it.

Chaplains can't effectively build spirituality in their formation if they aren't attending to the Soldiers' and families' religious needs. The chapel provides most of the spiritual support Soldiers require. If not, they can direct chaplains to where they can get support for their Soldier.

The chapel also serves as the most common location for Soldier memorials. The CSM and chaplain should prioritize establishing or reviewing the SOP for honoring deceased Soldiers, the actions taken by the team, and subsequent memorials. Chaplains play an essential role in LSCO.

Chaplains' duties in combat, especially LSCO, are essential to success. Chaplains and CSMs who spiritually prepare formations in training prime them to persevere in combat. To prepare, chaplains must be present during training to build their skills.

The chaplains and CSMs must adapt their memorial SOPs to battlefield constraints. Furthermore, during LSCO, CSMs and chaplains must consider what hasty mass memorials may look like. Care for the wounded becomes real, and dealing with combat fatigue and the emotional



Developing chaplains during garrison operations is essential but must be extended to tactical operations as well. Including the chaplain or creating opportunities for them beyond providing field services is vital. (U.S. Army photo by Pfc. Rebeca Soria)

tolls of combat becomes a reality.

Religious field services may not always be practical, so identifying key times and transition points is essential. They must work together to oversee the honorable transport and removal of fallen Soldiers' remains.

The volume of death will likely exceed their capacities, and their team will head the effort to ensure the fallen receive dignified and respectful treatment. Together, the CSM and chaplain will guarantee spiritual readiness and prepare Soldiers to thrive in garrison, training, and combat.

## Conclusion

As leaders and Soldiers prepare for suffering in large-scale combat operations, chaplains and CSMs must focus their collaborative efforts on preparing warfighters to dominate in battle and thrive holistically.

In this regard, the Army must rely on resiliency built through spirituality and the care CSMs and chaplains

provide, allowing Soldiers to flourish and creating more resistance to life's friction.

Furthermore, CSMs and chaplains are the lynchpin to spiritual readiness. This connection will improve

resiliency, basic combat skills, and combat readiness through pragmatic, reliable techniques. As CSMs and chaplains work together to create an enterprise that builds resilience in the ranks, these key leaders must develop and share best practices to increase combat and spiritual readiness.

CSMs and chaplains must work together to create a culture that helps Soldiers thrive during LSCO and in their personal lives. They must share in their Soldiers' suffering by being at friction points while deployed and in garrison. As these two combat multipliers compound their effectiveness by

synchronizing their efforts, they dramatically increase the Army's ability to fight and win the nation's wars. ■



1st Lt. Ibrahim Oladejo, chaplain, delivers an Eid khutba (sermon) while observing the Eid al-Fitr celebration, a Muslim festival marking the end of the fast of Ramadan, during a field training exercise, April 10, 2024, at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. Chaplains can help Soldiers if they are active and creative in improving spiritual readiness and morale. (U.S. Army photo by Paul Stamps)

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