

# “Since War Begins in the Minds of Men . . . ”: Combat Ministry Away from the Battle

Violence is in the air, and war is on our minds. Terrorists today have forced us to confront the possibility of danger not only in combat zones, but even during port calls. Our emphasis on *maritime strategy* — a strategy predicated on our readiness to respond to aggression by seizing the initiative, and taking the battle to the enemy — demands we “think combat,” and train to sharpen war-fighting skills. And, because this strategy includes the possibility of responding to an attack in one hemisphere with a counter-attack of our own in another, no cruise can be viewed as outside the realm of potential conflict. Even renewed religious studies which question nuclear warfare and remind us of classical “just war” categories often serve to underscore the real danger that war — nuclear or not, and “just” or not — may be closer than we think.

On the wall of the U.S. Naval War College, there is an inscription, taken from the UNESCO charter: “Since war begins in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that defenses of peace must be constructed.” Talk of “combat ministry” often brings to mind images of the battlefield, and focuses on the last-minute comfort or solace we might offer the wounded and dying in the most terrible of conditions.

The truth is, combat ministry is not some unique form of service known only to chaplains “at the front.” There, chaplains will face a special challenge, to be sure, for they will have to minister to those racked with pain or shaken by confusion and fear, *even as the chaplain, too, faces terror, danger, and pain; even as the chaplain, too,*

Reprinted from  
THE NAVY CHAPLAIN,  
Vol. 1, No. 1  
Fall 1986

## Fear and Doubt



*In Biblical times, the shofar, the ram's horn, was sounded as a call to assembly, or a call to battle. Onboard USS AMERICA, Chaplain Resnicoff sounds the shofar during morning services during the month leading up to Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of the Jewish year.*

## Facing Combat Before Battle

## Combat Strikes Mind and Heart

*faces self-doubt and the challenge to hold onto faith. But feelings linked to battle, and the very images of battle itself, may rage in the minds of men and women far removed from the front. Combat ministry must repond to those who face the terror of war in their thoughts, and in their hearts.*

As chaplains, therefore, we must offer ministry — combat ministry, or some form of it — to those whose lives are touched by *thoughts of war*. To paraphrase the War College inscription, "Since war begins in the minds of men — or women — it is in response to the thoughts in these minds that a philosophy of ministry must be constructed."

### STAGE ONE: THE PRESENT

What such an approach means, of course, is that every chaplain must understand that he or she is **involved** in a form of combat ministry from the moment active duty begins. We cannot model ministry in the Navy after parish experiences back home. Civilians can choose to avoid thoughts of war; men and women in uniform cannot. When the danger of military attack colors the thoughts of church members, a pastor might appropriately seek to soothe unrealistic fears. We must respond to such thoughts in a different manner. We minister in a combat environment wherever we are stationed.

This approach to combat ministry — the approach I will outline in the remainder of this article — is, of course, based on personal beliefs, tied to personal experiences. But these beliefs are such that they will strike a responsive chord, I think, in other chaplains who have worked with Naval personnel, or their families. There are rabbis, priests, and ministers who have themselves known the heat of battle more frequently than I, or at closer range. They will be better equipped to speak of the approach, the word, or the gesture which seemed to count the most, or help the most, while our troops faced the hell of enemy fire. But sometimes hell, like beauty, lies in the eye of the beholder — or in his or her mind.

Today, some doctors and counselors have come to realize that images of war — and, therefore, in a way, *the reality of war* — can continue to haunt combat veterans long after the battle is over. Thankfully, studies of "post-traumatic stress syndrome" have taken on real importance both in the military and VA environment. But, for me, such recognition reveals only the tip of the iceberg. For, if we can face war in our thoughts after the fact, we can face it beforehand, as well.

At Chaplains School some months back, the Advanced Course students watched a demonstration of nuclear-biological-chemical (NBC) gear, to raise questions about ministry on the "battlefield of tomorrow." How could a chaplain hold a Eucharist service, for instance, if masks make it impossible to eat or drink? More than one chaplain seemed amused that we would even raise the question, since (as they put it) once that gear was put on, we might as well prepare for the end.

But, our troops and we ourselves do don such gear right now — even if only in training, if not during actual alerts. What thoughts remain in the minds of recruits who go through such an exercise? Do they resign themselves to the fact that fighting is useless. Do they lose hope? Do they remember how suffocating the gear seemed, and how terrible was the prospect of death. As chaplains, we must face the



practical questions linked to our own religious rites. But we must also face the challenge to minister now to those who prepare to fight. For many of them, the need for ministry in a combat environment — even a nuclear environment — already exists.

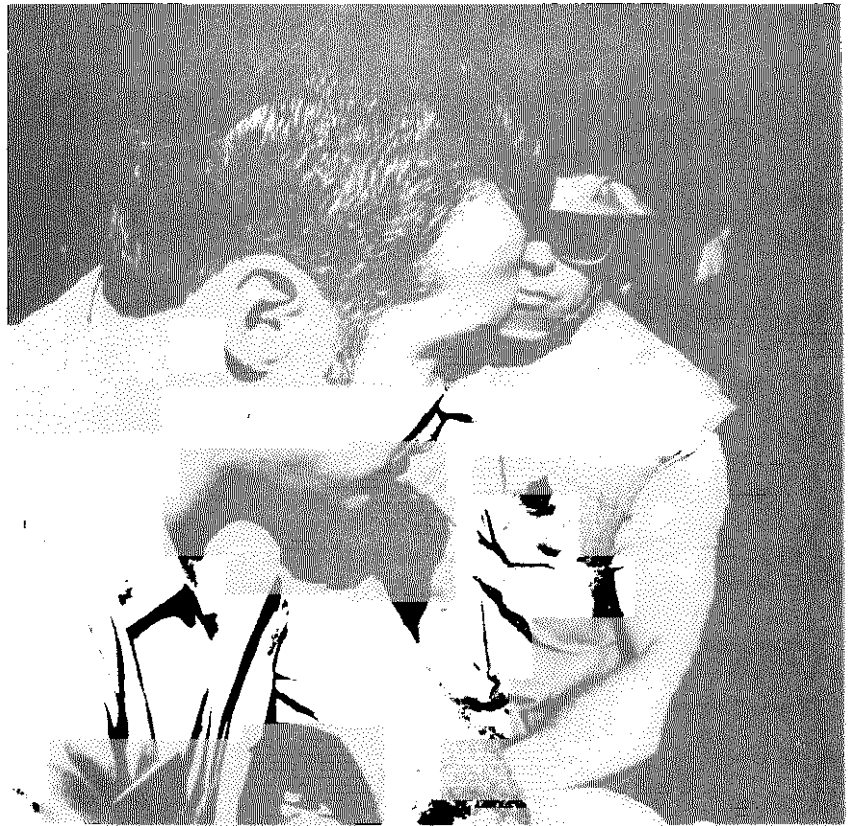
Such ministry may involve discussions in an abstract sense: questions about why war exists, and why humanity cannot learn to live in peace. But, perhaps more often than not, there are deeper, and more personal questions, as well. Training often conditions us to act, to respond, to fight, almost automatically. But thoughts do not disappear; doubts about one's strength or courage under fire — human reactions in the face of "the real thing" — are only buried. They remain, and, if not faced, may grow into fears out of control. Helping our people deal with such questions is also a form of combat ministry.

At times, it is easier for us, as chaplains, to dismiss fears than it is to deal with them. But part of combat ministry involves helping others understand what fears are realistic. Such ministry challenges those chaplains who will deploy, and those who will not. When troops are training for war, perhaps families should be training, as well: for the possibility of hearing news of a tragedy, without knowing names of survivors; for the possibility of news of death. Combat ministry might include the establishment of support systems among the fami-

*The Chapel of the Four Chaplains, in Philadelphia, PA, helps record the roles chaplains have played during times of combat — and the unique way chaplains of all faiths work side-by-side. Here, the three chaplains present in Beirut, Lebanon, on 23 October 1986, are awarded the "Hall of Heroes Gold Medallion." Left-to-right: Chaplain Arnold Resnicoff, with his wife, Barbara, and daughter, Malka; Chaplain George Pucciarelli; and Chaplain Danny Wheeler, and his wife, Brenda. Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant: three Navy Chaplains who worked side-by-side.*

## Family Training

*Each time shells would fall, chaplains working with U.S. forces would try to run for "new" foxholes, to spend time with a different group of men.*



lies that stay behind: lists of volunteers who can take young children at a moment's notice. Combat ministry might include the challenge of teaching others to prepare for the worst, even while praying for the best.

## **Ethical and Moral Study**

For troops facing danger, there is a religious education element — an element of ethical and moral study — in this early stage of combat ministry, as well. I am absolutely convinced — although the thesis is most probably unprovable — that the fact no marine in Beirut picked up a gun following the October 1983 explosion with the intention of firing wildly, blindly, at any non-American in sight was not simply the result of training and discipline. It was, instead, at least partly the result of thinking beforehand, thinking which considered such actions on the part of so many groups within Lebanon — violence based on vengeance, violence which begat more violence, until it was almost impossible to remember any longer who fired the first shot. If we were to make a difference in Beirut, we used to say, then we had *to be different* ourselves. We were different, thanks in part, I think, to these discussions.

Admiral Stockdale has written of his POW experiences that his background in philosophy and the classics helped him weather the terrors he faced. He remembered what others had said about adversity, and about integrity, about evil, and about good. He remembered the dreams of some great people, and those dreams touched his life and gave him strength.

Can anyone prepare in advance for combat? I think so. One aim of training is to enable people to act when necessary, without thinking. We must also prepare them so that, when appropriate, they can think, without acting.

## STAGE TWO: LETTER-WRITING

Going through the rubble in Beirut, after the explosion, Chaplain George Pucciarelli and I came across a packet of letters, labeled, "To be mailed in case of death." The young marine who had written these letters had moved closer to combat — *perhaps was already in combat, in many ways, through the images in his mind.*

Thoughts change in two ways in this second stage. First, they turn from thinking about violence and war in the abstract to considerations of real-life scenarios. Now the sailor or marine knows what kind of an enemy is near, and what kind of fighting might erupt. Second, thoughts of war may now begin to include thoughts of death.

What feelings touch a person at a time when thoughts of death are grounded not in paranoia, but in cold, hard facts? There is, of course, a desire to feel that our side is the "good" side, and the risks we take are worthwhile. But, on a more personal level, questions return, or reemerge, concerning personal courage, and individual strength. For some, such fears are terrifying, but there is a certain courage which a group bestows on its members, a kind of shared storehouse of strength from which each individual may draw. Ironically, now, as danger becomes more real, doubts are sometimes viewed more with a sense of curiosity than terror. At least for some, a sense of resignation sets in now, a condition which may carry with it its own dangers, for some sense of fear may be healthy.

But, if there are not feelings of anguish linked to the battle, sorrow may touch our thoughts of home.

There are always words unsaid, which might now never be — or others said, but regretted with all our heart; there are promised deeds which now remain undone — and others done, which we recall with shame.

In Judaism, there is a traditional document called the "ethical will." No material goods are mentioned in this will, nor are tangible possessions apportioned to survivors. Instead, this will speaks of dreams bequeathed to a generation yet to come. It contains words addressed to children still too young to understand them — or too impatient to listen to them — but who now might listen still. It includes hopes which — for whatever reason — never found their way into words.

When a sailor or marine labels an envelope, "to be opened in case of death," the ethical will comes to my mind — and a belief in the power of this tradition. The thinking-out of such a message may help the writer; its possession can certainly help the griever. Already, we encourage our people to visit lawyers, to prepare legal documents linked to death. We might be speaking to them as chaplains, as they think of spiritual dreams tied to life.

Back home, chaplains working with families during this stage might take a similar approach. "Ethical wills" — or letters to be mailed, mending fences, sharing thoughts — need be written not only by the person in uniform, but also by the spouse left behind. Sometimes, such actions will help at home should tragic news arrive, and mourning begin. At other times, as a result of life's ironic twists, those in battle survive, while those who remain back home do not. Again, such letters help.

## When the Danger is Real

## The Ethical Will

## The Value of Presence

## Call for the Chaplain

### STAGE THREE: WHEN BULLETS FLY

Ministering during actual battle conditions is not merely a matter of reaching the most people possible, and touching them physically; it also involves the challenge of making one's presence known, and so touching many spiritually. There can be a sense of comfort from the knowledge that the chaplain has not given up: symbolically it is linked to a personal commitment to "hang in there," and not give up hope. In some small way, a chaplain's efforts to reach out even in times of fear and suffering — the efforts of a man or woman wearing the cross or tablets — come to symbolize that part of all of us which still cares for our people, and for our world.

Even in peace-time, of course, we speak of a "ministry of presence." In the harsher time of combat and crisis, it seems to me this form of ministry takes on increased importance.

During the hard days of digging which followed the Beirut explosion, marines here and there would come across a body — or a piece of one — buried under heavy rubble or steel beams. Even before calling out for help with digging, or for special equipment, marines again and again would cry out for a chaplain. The decision to call for us was, for some of the marines, a way of praying. Having us stand by them as they continued the digging was, for many of them, a statement of faith.



*Rabbi David Lapp, Director of the JWB Commission on Jewish Chaplaincy, leads a flight-deck service onboard USS SARATOGA (CV 60). Rabbi Lapp's visit, and his prayers, were also a part of "combat ministry": reminding the men in the fleet of their ties to family, to nation, and to faith.*



*Combat Ministry includes finding time, where possible, for religious ceremonies: rituals which reaffirm our ties not only to our communities back home, but also to the generations of the past. Here, onboard USS GUADALCANAL, flagship for Commander, U. S. Forces Lebanon, Rabbi Arnold Resnicoff conducts a Passover Seder for Jewish sailors and marines attached to the Multi-national Peacekeeping Force in Beirut.*

Combat ministry during these times may center on the battle, but chaplains back home now enter a new stage of ministry, as well. *If war begins in one's mind, then it is important for us to understand that relatives may be living with images even worse than the realities of the field.* For too many, a chaplain's visit is an event to be feared, not welcomed, for we have trained our people to recognize us as harbingers of bad news. Chaplains assemble, ready to begin accompanying CACO's as death notices arrive. Perhaps our training for combat ministry should include an exploration of pastoral care we can offer during the long hours of waiting, when there is no news, when there is only dread.

#### **STAGE FOUR: POST-COMBAT COMFORT**

*It is obvious the wounded need care. What is sometimes less obvious is that mourners need comfort — and that not only families back home become mourners after a military attack. In a very real way, virtually all survivors become mourners, as well.*

We sometimes feel compelled to explain or justify what we have seen, as if we, and not God, had all the answers. But, at least in Beirut, I learned that "wisdom" was not what our men demanded of the chaplains; what they wanted was our presence. What they wanted to see was that we had not given up, or gone away.

A minister once told me what he used to say to parishioners on their way to a funeral: "Don't just do something, *stand there.*" In Jewish tradition, we have a similar teaching. During the days of mourning, following a death, visits to the family are encouraged. But visitors speak only when the mourner begins the conversation. Otherwise, they simply sit down, and — with their presence — remind the mourners that they are not alone, and they are not forgotten.

But combat ministry must be aimed not merely at these human beings who now mourn the loss of a friend — or even many friends. Care must also be tendered to those who confront the sometimes agonizing question of why they are still alive. Combat ministry must understand that we must offer dignity to the treatment of the dead, comfort to the life of the wounded, and support for the needs of the survivors.

#### **Emotional Suffering of Survivors**

## Caring for Those Who Rage at God

Some survivors will have pockets of secret shame. They may be racked with guilt because they succumbed to weakness — or to what they perceive as weakness — instead of having risen to the heights of heroism of which others now speak. But some will suffer regardless of their actions, or even in spite of them: they will feel guilt linked merely to the fact that they remain alive, while others — perhaps others they regard as “worthier” than they — have died.

We help veterans who relive the combat experience. We must understand that survivors need aid not only linked to memories of the past; they need help, as well, tied to questions of why they have been given a future.

Combat ministry must support those who take out rage on God — sometimes the easiest of targets — and swear they’ll not set foot in church or synagogue again. Judaism teaches that theology must be postponed while the dead lie before our eyes. We must understand that images of bodies blown apart may be in our eyes long after they are laid to rest. One challenge of ministry at this stage may simply be to postpone those decisions which demand we face them with clear heads. No one would want to make a decision about a new car while sick in bed or delirious with fever. What we must sometimes do is try to help the suffering to understand that during a time of pain and grief — a time of fever which affects both heart and mind — they should make no decisions which will affect the rest of life.



*Ministry in combat involves the chaplain with symbols of faith. When Rabbi Resnicoff used his kippa (skullcap) to mop the brow of a wounded marine immediately following the October 1983 truck-bomb attack, Chaplain George Pucciarelli tore a circle of camouflage cloth from his own marine cap — a piece of material which became the Rabbi's new kippa.*

Ministry during this stage involves those who work with families back home, as well: families torn apart by combat. The bereaved need support as they grieve. Some must learn it is all right to mourn, while others must one day understand that even mourning has its limits, and life demands we begin to look ahead.

In this post-combat stage, guilt can gnaw the living in many ways. Some must live with thoughts which crossed their minds in anger, but which now will never be forgotten. "I wish he were dead," a fleeting thought, born in the rage of an instant, can now seem to burn like an eternal flame, searing like a coal into a conscience. Feelings of jealousy can arise on the part of those who "missed the action," feelings which can turn to resentment toward those who have survived, and those who have not: feelings which may tear apart another life, and claim one more casualty for the battles others think are long since over.

And, during this stage, we must remember that communities must grieve as well. Ceremonies which commemorate our heroes, and mourn our dead, have healing powers for us all. But these, too, must end. Chaplains must understand the danger of ceremonies which force the same survivors to act out roles they must finally set behind them. At first, our place may be to minister to the community by creating or supporting rituals; later, it may be our responsibility to point out when they must cease.

### STAGE FIVE: CHRONICLES

At some point, combat ministry begins to involve a role which we might call *Biblically-inspired: the role of chronicler*. Events, good and bad, must be set within a framework of faith. We all must find a way to remember pain without forever wallowing in it. We must remember, and yet we must find cause for hope.

For Jews, such a process is only now beginning with memories of the Holocaust. For Americans, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, helped us understand the telling of stories, and even the listing of names, were essential first steps toward setting a time of war which divided us into a perspective of dreams which bring us together.

After my experience in Beirut, I was approached to share my feelings not as an individual, but as a chaplain — as a person who was called to speak out based on a foundation of faith. Others want to know that faith might endure, that, in fact, it might enable us to endure. For physical survival is not enough; we must survive in a spiritual sense, as well.

In a sense, this fifth stage of combat ministry begins to merge once again with the first, and so a cycle of violence must also be transformed into a cycle of hope, a challenge to offer comfort and ministry at every stage. For memories, even memories which give us hope, remind us once again of the possibility of future war, future tragedy, and therefore, present danger.

"Maritime Strategy" is a watchword these days within the Navy. We base military strategy, and military thinking, on a national stance of *deterrence*. In order to safeguard peace, we equip and train for war. We take a stand which says we are prepared to fight — not only when home-ground might be attacked, but when freedom elsewhere is threatened, for freedom is a precious commodity in this age, and

### The Pain of Guilt

### Cycle of Hope and Comfort

*Combat ministry continues after the battle, when we comfort those with physical — or emotional — wounds; when we work with their families; and when, together, we mourn our dead, and remember their sacrifices, and their dreams.*



liberty is a treasure which all free men and women must protect. For some, a stand against the role of world police means turning our heads aside, or burying them in the sand, so long as guns are not pointed directly at *our* heads.

National strategy, and maritime strategy, are grounded in our belief that we remain a symbol for that world we still call "free." It is founded on a willingness to take risks, and make sacrifices, not merely for national interest, but also — at times — for national dreams.

Ministering in such an environment makes special demands on us, no matter what the stands our faith groups back home might take on ultimate issues of war and peace, or violence and love. We cannot see our roles within the service in terms of parish ministry back home, or construct our sermons as if they were aimed at members whose views will be expressed at the ballot box. The men and women whom we serve will vote with their lives. World events or issues of military preparedness which church and synagogue groups read about in the paper, or feel on an individual level in terms of taxes, will mean for us, and our people, deployments, separations, fear, and — if not combat itself — nagging thoughts of combat which carry with them confusion and pain, fear and guilt.

Combat ministry is therefore not merely a form of chaplaincy which we might be called to perform: it is the business we are in right now. The stages of combat I have outlined above are not strictly chronological, and not merely geographical, for some will experience thoughts of war while they are still far from the battle; others will convince themselves that real danger does not exist for them, even as their comrades begin to fall. Some wives back home may think so much of battles afar that the stress and fatigue we seem to associate with war may keep them awake at night and fill their days with anguish. Others will make light of any neighbor's worry, until the chaplain's car pulls up along their street.

Our challenge is to understand that war is often on our minds and sometimes in our hearts. We are called to minister in combat situations. We are called to minister right now. Combat ministry is the name of the game.

LCDR A. E. Resnicoff, CHC, USN

## The Business We are in Now