

A look at military chaplains in the Covenant Church

Ministry in UNIF

Bob Smietana

On Thursday morning, October 12, a small boat packed with explosives rammed the guided missile destroyer USS Cole during a refueling visit in Aden, Yemen. The attack killed seventeen U.S. Navy sailors and injured thirty-nine others. The attack on the Cole focused attention on the thousands of young men and women in the armed forces and the sacrifices they make to serve their country.

Military chaplains play an important role in caring for the men and women in the armed forces. Fifteen Covenant pastors currently serve as military chaplains, with more serving in the reserves.

In late October, *Companion* associate editor Bob Smietana sat down with two chaplains to talk about the challenges of life as a military chaplain, especially in crisis like the Cole.

Jim Erickson, sixty-nine, is a Covenant minister and doctor who served for fifteen years in the Navy and for twenty-two years in the Public Health Service—the last seven as a chaplain and a doctor. After retiring in 1993, he became a volunteer chaplain with the Civil Air Patrol. He currently teaches spiritual formation part-time at North Park Theological Seminary and anatomy at Northeastern Illinois University. He is the deputy endorser for chaplains for the Covenant.

Bob Hubbard, fifty-seven, is professor of Old Testament at North Park Theological Seminary and a retired Naval Reserve chaplain. He retired in June after thirty years in the Navy, the last twenty-six in the reserves.



Covenant Companion: Why did you become chaplains?

Bob: In the late 1960s, I was in graduate school and then went to seminary because I lost my student deferment. When I didn't go into ministry after seminary, I became a Navy

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chaplain. It was my way of fulfilling a military obligation, which I felt I had gone to seminary to get around. I finished seminary in 1969, then served for four years on active duty. I was in Vietnam in 1971.

Jim: I was commissioned as a Naval medical officer, and then I came to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) in Norfolk, Virginia. When I got there, the admiral said, "Doc, I see that you have a theological degree. You've had experience as a chaplain in a civilian setting. That's good, because you are now my chaplain. We usually beg, borrow, and steal our chaplains." So I wrote Don Njaa [former executive director of the Covenant ministry] and told him that I needed an endorsement.

CC: What happens in a crisis or emergency like the bombing of the USS Cole and what are some of the special concerns that you try and help people deal with?

Bob: Ships are very small places—that ship I think had 325 people. When you are out to sea, working eighteen hours a day, sleeping in very small compartments, and working in very small spaces, you get pretty close to people. There is a very special bond—there is nothing else like it that I know of. And when people are killed in that situation, those bonds are ruptured. These are buddies that you have lived with, you've gone into port with, if they are married you know their wives and children. It's like a small a community, like your next-door neighbor. So it's very traumatic for that close-knit group.

The immediate concern is to take care of the casualties, focus on handling the emergency, getting people who are injured to help, and keeping the ship afloat, secure, and safe. Everything is focused on survival. It's really the aftermath, once those are all taken care of, where the real ministry takes place, when

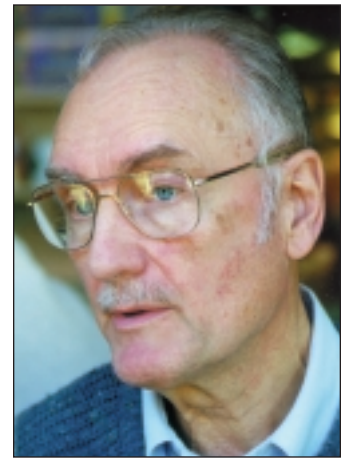
the reality sinks in and the real grief takes over.

The other dimension concerns the people who have had to dig out the bodies and all the mangled flesh and had to handle the body parts. That is incredibly traumatic. And very often, it's not just medical people involved—crew people are cutting the floors and looking for bodies.

Jim: The other half of the equation is dealing with grief of the families who are left in Norfolk, Virginia [the Cole's home port], dealing with all that's going on at home, and sometimes scattered across the country, as the person may not live on the base where the ship is from.

CC: What was the hardest part and what was the most fulfilling part of being a chaplain?

Jim: I think the hardest part for any military person, whether it's a chaplain or any other person, is the long separations from family. [The separation] disrupts things. That year [I spent] in Vietnam was a long, long time. I think back to WWII, and my dad's first boss had been away from his family for two-and-a-half years. Now we do six-month deployments. You get notified that in a



Bob Hubbard

"...these young men and women are in all kinds of places and they are the tip of the spear. This is not just video games—these are real live people in harm's way."

Bob Smietana is associate editor of The Covenant Companion.

Chaplains in ACTION

Timothy Theurer



Some of my most memorable experiences of ministry are from my tour aboard the USS Shreveport from 1989 to 1991. An amphibious ship, the Shreveport transported 600 Marines and their combat equipment, based out of Norfolk, Virginia. While the ship is at sea, it is Navy tradition that the chaplain provides an evening prayer prior to taps at 2200 (10:00 p.m.) each night. This prayer is given from the pilot-house, where the ship is steered, and is broadcast into every compartment of the ship.

It was an incredible privilege to address the officers and crew each evening, providing them spiritual encouragement and challenge, and then leading them in prayer. I was assigned to the ship for thirty months of which seventeen months we were at sea. For eight of those months we were deployed in the Middle East for Desert Shield and Desert Storm.

I thank God for the opportunity to minister to our sailors and marines while they were away from their families and going in harm's way. □

Timothy Theurer is a Covenant minister and U.S. Navy chaplain at Camp Pendleton, a Marine Corps base in California.

Chaplains in ACTION

Anne Krekelberg



At Master Jet Base Naval Station Oceana in Virginia Beach, Virginia, a plane takes off or lands every two minutes. Thirteen strike fighter squadrons and two training units composed of state-of-the-art F/A-18 Hornets and F-14 Tomcats make NAS Oceana the world's most advanced Naval Air Station.

With over 16,000 Navy personnel including pilots, maintenance, administrative, and support staff as a congregation, a chaplain's work is never done. As one of seven chaplains assigned to the base, I make my home at AIMD—Aircraft Intermediate Maintenance Department.

AIMD's job is to keep 'em flying twenty-four hours a day. The work is hard, tedious, and often takes precedence over family. Half of the sailors assigned to AIMD are deployed with aircraft carriers, requiring them to leave home and loved ones for at least six months at sea. Much of my time is spent counseling—the stress of deployment, homesick young sailors who wonder if they've made the right decision in leaving home behind, young couples coping with new marriages, lack of communication skills and long separations. Having just completed forty-two months of shipboard duty and a six-month Mediterranean deployment, I understand their struggles.

Many of our young men and women join the military because they are looking for a better life, attempting to get away from broken and abusive homes. The Navy provides the stability and discipline they never received from family, but they need someone who can help them mend the wounds and assist them on their spiritual journey. The chaplain's office provides a safe place where stories can be told in confidence.

My personal motto is one borrowed from Faith Covenant Church in Colorado Springs, Colorado, "Rooted deep...bearing fruit...branching out." As a Navy chaplain, I am called to root myself and others deep into God's word, to share the love of God through Jesus Christ, and to serve those who serve our country. □

Anne Krekelberg is a Covenant minister and U.S. Navy chaplain at Oceana Naval Air Station in Virginia. She and her husband, a reserve navy chaplain, live in Virginia Beach, Virginia.

month's time you are going to be in Saudi Arabia for the next six months.

Bob: You miss half the life of your family.

Jim: I missed my youngest learning how to walk and my kids going through early school. When I came home, they really wanted to hang on Daddy because I hadn't been around in awhile.

Bob: The hardest thing for me was to maneuver as a Christian in what is really a secular environment. On the outside, when you are in a home church we all share Christ in common. But as a chaplain, you have got to work with all kinds of people from all kinds of backgrounds and try to remain faithful to your convictions while somehow still relating to people who are on a totally different wavelength than you. Sometimes you can find ways to build a bridge and have some conversation, and share Christ. Other times there is just no way that you can make a connection.

Jim: And then you don't want to come off as somehow holier than thou either. You want to be one with the troops. Yet many times, you have to go

to your commander and say, "Your morale is down because this is happening, and this is not morally acceptable."

Bob: Then there are little things that you do that people will never forget. You may just come by and have a word of prayer at the hospital and they will never forget that. Or you are on the back of a ship and chatting with somebody, and the person tells you about something that's bothering them. It may not be terribly earthshaking but to them it's really a concern. And just a simple prayer—they don't forget those things.

Jim: Another issue is that military chaplains are in a pluralistic environment. I represent the transcendent but also I am there to protect every individual's right to worship as he or she deems fit to worship. We work side-by-side with Jewish chaplains and Muslim chaplains, and we will probably soon have Buddhist chaplains.

CC: Do you feel that you have a better understanding of other faiths?

Jim: Very much so—in fact, you become very ecumenical. That doesn't

mean that you are disloyal to your own tradition but you are able to work with others from different faith traditions. And with the Christian community, you see different forms of worship that you may decide to adapt for your own.

Chaplains provide counsel to the need that occurs at the moment. I can remember being twelve or thirteen and my dad, who was a Navy chaplain, was home. He told me to take his uniform into the cleaners. I found a crucifix in the pocket, and asked, "Dad, what's this crucifix doing in your pocket?"

And he said, "If I have a Catholic kid who needs my help, that's what he will understand and recognize."

CC: There seems to be a conflict between being in the military and being a Christian. The military's job is to go to war and to protect people—how do you reconcile that with Jesus, who said to turn the other cheek?

Jim: It's a complicated issue, but I would say that nobody is outside the bounds of God's care. And as a chaplain, I am responsible for bringing God's presence—Christ's presence—into lousy situations. You can make all kinds of arguments—the pacifists against the hawks—and you have those among all kinds of chaplains. But chaplains don't carry guns. We are there to represent the transcendent, and why shouldn't the military receive the same kind of care as anybody else. One can hold their own personal feelings about war, and whether war in general can ever be righteous.

There is a certain sense of patriotism as well. I wouldn't have gone into the service at all if I hadn't had some sense of patriotism—that they had a need that I could fulfill—almost like a call.

Bob: I think that you would be surprised at how much ethical reflection goes on among chaplains and among military personnel in general. We need to be careful that we don't presume that all military people just love to go out and kill people. There is no doubt that some love to go out and shoot them up and there is nothing they like better than flying and bombing and strafing. But that's the kind of people they have to be in order to do what they do. But for the most part, in the quiet moments aboard ship, people all have a sense that they are walking the borders of ethics,

and they all have an uneasy conscience. Nobody, for the most part, really wants to do this. But they feel that there are situations when ethics and morals demand that somebody do something against evil. We may disagree about what that is and whether we are on the right side or not sometimes. But most people that have to pull the trigger understand that this has some moral compromise to it—down deep and very often outspokenly, they grieve over that.

Jim: And I think that is true even of those who look like they are gung-ho. They think, “I wish I didn’t have to do this but it’s my job and I’ve got to do it and if I do it well, maybe this war will be over faster.”

CC: There also seems to be the element of sacrifice.

Bob: And that’s what the Cole reminds us of—that these young men and women are in all kinds of places and they are the tip of the spear. This is not just video games—these are real live people in harm’s way—in a case like the Cole, in very surprising ways.

CC: Both of you have been around combat—what is it like to minister to people in that life-and-death situation?

Jim: Well, it’s scary, being shot at. There is no doubt about that. I remem-

Chaplains in ACTION

Dwight Johnson



After ten years of serving as a pastor in Covenant churches, I had the opportunity to join the U.S. Air Force as a chaplain. The original commitment was only for three years, and it seemed like a good change of pace at the time. When people asked me why I joined the Air Force, I told them, “temporary insanity.”

However, after two decades, it’s no longer temporary.

In many ways, being an Air Force chaplain is being a pastor. There are worship services, Sunday-school classes, choirs, youth groups, boards, and committees. In short, everything a typical church has except concern over whether there will be enough money available to pay the pastor. In the military, American taxpayers pay the chaplain.

The heart and soul of being a chaplain comes on deployments. We have to be ready to go on a moment’s notice to be the spiritual support for our young men and women in crisis. My shortest notice was a phone call one Saturday morning in July 1994, telling me that I was heading for Central Africa on Monday because of the situation in Rwanda. But these were the richest moments, when I found numerous opportunities to minister to wonderful young airmen, to hear their stories, and share my own faith. □

Dwight Johnson is a Covenant minister, and recently retired U.S. Air Force chaplain from Columbia, Maryland.

ber saying at the end of one week, “Lord, they have shot at me three times this week. I guess if you got me through this, I can get through anything.” And I can remember my deputy asking me towards the end of my time, “Jim, you know you only have two months more to go—do you really want to go out to the hinterland again?” I told him that it goes with

the territory. That’s my job to go out and visit my [staff] out in the hills. So you take the risks. It’s much worse on your family. I know that Shirley isn’t the only wife who said, “Every time I heard of a helicopter going down in Vietnam, I wondered if you were on it.”

Bob: There is no experience like it, and God forbid that we should ever go through it. I know it has given me a lot more empathy towards local police and the situations they have to operate in.

I had the principle that it was bad enough that I had to be there, but I was not going to do anything dumb. One night, a helicopter pilot was on his way to try and rescue some freighters that were going up the Mekong River into Cambodia and were getting shot at from the riverbank. And he said to me, as he ran down the hall, his .45 slung over his shoulder, “Want to go flying chaplain?” And I said, “No thanks, Commander, I think I will stay here.” I could have gone, I would have been pretty safe, but I was not going to take that risk.

Jim: When I was with NOAA, I was flying with an Army helicopter, coming back from Fort Eustace, Virginia. We had just gotten up to altitude to cross the widest part of the Potomac and there was this bang and we started falling like a rock out of the sky. The plane commander got on the radio right away and

Chaplains in ACTION

Douglas Wootten



There are few dull moments in ministry here at what some of us affectionately call “Planet Hood.” Fort Hood is one of the largest military installations in the world—with more than 42,000 soldiers and a total population of 185,000. We have seven schools and nine chapels with multiple services and ministries within all of them. I provide direct pastoral care and ministry to approximately 800 soldiers plus their family members, and I assist the garrison chaplain in overseeing all the ministries at Fort Hood.

At our main post chapel on Tuesday mornings, around 9 a.m., you would see some 175 to 200 women, with lots of baby strollers and pre-schoolers in tow. It’s the weekly meeting of Protestant Women of the Chapel (PWOC). They gather for about twenty-five minutes of praise and worship, then one of the lay leaders directs the entire group in a moving time of prayer—some verbal, some silent, and some prayers are shared throughout the sanctuary. After their Tuesday morning church, the congregation splits into fifteen various rooms in the chapel—sharing about everything from being a new Christian mom to strengthening your marriage.

Thank you for your continuing prayer support for our military. Keep your Covenant chaplains and all our military personnel in your prayers. □

Douglas Wootten is a Covenant minister and U.S. Army chaplain, currently the troop support chaplain at Fort Hood, Texas. He and his family live in Temple, Texas.

said, “Doc, do you think we can make the Virginia side?” I said, “You’ll never make it to the Virginia side. Look, there is a nice sandbar, take it.” We landed with one side on the edge of the sandbar and one in the drink.

And that’s part of the thing you are trained to do. People ask, “Do things flash before your mind?” You don’t have time to think about things, you are thinking about all of the emergency procedures that you have been trained to think about and do.

CC: Can you give one or two examples of times during your ministry that you remember as significant?

Jim: I remember sailing in Antarctica, and I was making rounds with the captain. We were down in the engine room, and one of the engineers stopped me and said, “Chaplain, could we have a separate service, because we all work in the morning and we can’t get to your Sunday morning worship service—and that just makes a chaplain’s day.

Bob: I was doing two weeks at Navy Training Center in San Diego, and on

a late Thursday afternoon, a seaman recruit came in. He was from a Central American country, where his wife and child still lived. He didn’t know how to get them to the States. They had trouble with immigration. So I did what every Navy chaplain does—you network with people who are the experts. I called the legal office, and reached an officer there and he said, “We can take care of that, send him down.”

I took him out the front door and said, “Go over to that building that says legal office, and you talk to the lieutenant and he will take care of you.” I remember watching this young man and imagining what took place afterwards.

CC: Is there anything about being a military chaplain that would give readers an insight into what the people that you serve with are like?

Bob: I have known some absolutely wonderful people, dedicated, family people, would do anything for you that they could. And there are people who just struggle. They don’t know how to manage their money, they don’t know how

to live with each other as husband and wife, they don’t know how to raise kids. It’s really a glimpse of some of the best of humanity and some of the real struggling of humanity. And you have to maneuver and be Christlike in the middle of it.

Jim: For many, it’s just a big culture shock. There are kids who grow up now who haven’t had to be responsible, and all of a sudden they have to learn to obey orders and do what they are told except when Mom and Dad would occasionally get on them. But now they are really in line—they have to march to meals and do this and do that when they would rather do something else. And some really struggle with that and others blossom and bloom. □

Becoming a military chaplain is neither an easy decision nor an easy process. The services want very well-educated and trained chaplains. One must, of course, have a call to ministry, but one must also feel called to this particular form of ministry. Excellent college/university and seminary education are required, along with pastoral experience and a denominational endorsement. For the Covenant, this means that our Department of the Ministry believes the chaplain candidate is the “right person for the right job for the right reasons at the right time.” In addition to the educational and service requirements, there are also physical fitness requirements. Chaplains “go with the troops,” and must be just as physically qualified as they are.

Covenant military chaplains have a tough job. They and their families, from whom they are frequently separated, need your support and prayers. Since most are not near a Covenant church, perhaps your church can adopt a chaplain and his or her family, providing connection and support. Perhaps your conference would assist a chaplain in attending its annual meeting or ministers’ ashram. And most importantly—remember to pray for them.

For more information about Covenant military chaplains, contact Jim Erickson, padredoc@juno.com □

Chaplains in ACTION

James Fisher



The telephone rings, disturbing the family time at the supper table. Lieutenant Van Dickens (United Methodist), the command chaplain at the Coast Guard yard in Baltimore, Maryland, picks it up. “Van,” says his commanding officer, “a pier with a restaurant on it just collapsed in Philadelphia. Three people died and others are missing. They need your pastoral skills there.”

The telephone rings abruptly at headquarters, First Coast Guard District, Boston, Massachusetts. LCDR Thomasina Yuille (United Church of Christ), the district chaplain, wearily picks it up. Not many days have passed since JFK Jr. crashed off Martha’s Vineyard. The men and women of the Coast Guard are still processing their work from that event. “Chaplain Yuille,” says the voice on the other end, “an Egyptian airliner has just crashed into the Atlantic, we need your services again.”

The telephone rings in the chaplain’s office at the Integrated Support Command in Kodiak, Alaska. LCDR Ben Brown (Roman Catholic) smiles when he hears the cheery voice on the other end. “Hey chaps, there is some illegal fishing going on inside our borders. You want to come along with us as we stop them?”

The telephone rings at my office here in Washington, D.C., where I am deputy chaplain of the Coast Guard. The call is from my boss, Captain Ceroy Gilbert, one of the senior African Americans in the Navy Chaplain Corps. “Jim,” he says, “tell me again about the ethnic diversity initiatives in the Covenant Church.” We talk.

Every day the telephone rings for the thirty-eight Navy chaplains who serve the Coast Guard. Every day members of the Coast Guard save the lives of boaters, interdict boats carrying drugs, protect our environmental resources, and respond to national disasters. Every day chaplains serve the Coast Guard to provide real ministry for real contingencies. □

James Fisher is a Covenant minister and U.S. Navy chaplain assigned to the Coast Guard in Washington, D.C. He and his family live in Burke, Virginia.