

Donation of the Month

Chaplain's field kit
2001.41.1.1-9
Donor: Marvin Keenen



The Vietnam War was a long and bitter war in the hot jungles of South Asia. Although most fighting took place in Vietnam, battles were often fought in the neighboring countries of Laos and Cambodia as the border between these 3 countries was blurred. As the war dragged on more and more lives were lost and feelings at home began to slide toward hatred toward the government and apathy toward the military. As feelings about the war deteriorated across the United States it came to a head in 1968 with several protests on college campuses and other public venues all while the war was ramping up with the Tet Offensive. While the battles are fought by those carrying the guns there are large numbers of support personal caught in the cross fire. One group who shares the danger and discomforts are the military chaplains.

The military chaplain is trained as a pastor as well as a soldier. Each chaplain is issued a field kit containing everything needed to perform communion or other services out in the field. Initially there were three types of kits: Protestant, Catholic and Jewish. However, as the troops have become more diverse in their faiths the military has responded by allowing other faiths to provide chaplains. For example, in 1987

the United States forces allowed Muslim and Buddhist chaplains. Chaplains are able to also perform marriages, funerals, baptisms, and confirmations. The chaplains look after the spiritual well-being of the soldier as well as the innocent civilians caught in the cross-fire.

Marvin Keenen served as a chaplain in the military for 7 years on active duty then was in the reserves until retirement in 1993. He served in Vietnam from July 1967 to July 1968. During his service in Vietnam Keenen carried this military issued field kit. This type of kit was used starting in WWII through the early part of Vietnam; and became the personal property of the chaplain. By the middle of Vietnam the military issued a new smaller kit in a bag. This new kit remained property of the supply unit and was returned upon transfer. Keenen continued to carry the extra weight of this kit to provide a "more liturgical setting". Keenen recalled an instance when he accompanied a search and destroy mission and upon setting up his kit to perform a service was asked to keep it up for awhile. The soldier commented he had never seen such a field altar out in the "boonies" before and wanted to take a picture.

In most wars the chaplains provide the troops with support and morale. However, in Vietnam many soldiers viewed them as part of the military establishment and were only there to prop you up and send you back out. War is not something any religion promotes, and causes a conflict between the military chaplain's sense of duty to their country and to their religion. With the soldiers view of the military chaplains roll in Vietnam the chaplaincy lost some creditability. However, the presence and actions of the military chaplain can bring a soldier great comfort and support during a very testing situation.

War is a traumatic experience for all involved. A chaplain can bring some balance between the moral and duty contradictions brought about by war, by keeping some semblance of reality with Sunday services. Their roll as morale booster, counselor and fellow soldier in the same situation as the rest of the unit provides an invaluable service in the most trying of circumstances.

Chaplains during the Vietnam War in Combat Infantry Units, The Chaplains Corner – 1st battalion, 50th Infantry, featured on <http://www.ichiban1.org/html/chaplain.htm>

Donor file

"Military Chaplains: a rich history of more than blessing the cannons"; The Christian Science Monitor; October 30, 2007