

## **The Best Job in the Army**

Joey Byrd

I'm in the Army now, and a Presbyterian minister to boot.

I came on active duty "late in the game" of ministry after serving fourteen years in the traditional role of pastor of a congregation. I had pastored country churches and small city churches in Ohio and North Carolina, while at the same time serving as an Army Reserve or National Guard military chaplain. Then, through a miraculous calling from God, I was accessed from the reserves to active duty in the rank of major, which isn't supposed to happen. In other words, I went from being a full-time Presbyterian pastor and part-time Army chaplain to a full-time Army chaplain.

I'd like to share from my perspective what it's like being an Army chaplain.

It's 0520 and time to get up. Even though I have an alarm clock, it rarely, if ever, awakens me. I'm always awake hours before the crazy thing goes off. I crawl out of bed for a morning formation and then go run a few miles, up to four mornings a week. Today, I'll run just under five miles on the road—not at a fast pace, mind you. I hate to get out of bed to go running, but the Army thinks it's a good idea. I've always said I have the heart of an athlete and the body of a preacher. After years of active duty and many miles of running, I still have the body of a preacher. I do take pride that I'm 45 years old and still able to "run with the ponies," as I like to put it.

I'm proud to serve as an Army chaplain. It is the best job in the Army. I serve as the brigade chaplain of the 1st Heavy Brigade Combat Team of 2nd Infantry Division (2ID) that is permanently deployed forward in the Republic of Korea. (Yes, we still have troops in Korea.) I'm proud to tell people that the military chapels I serve are the closest ones to North Korea. The fighting force of the Army is made up of combat brigades. A brigade is the basic combat element when the Army goes to war. My brigade is made up of approximately 3,500 troops. Within every unit exists the Unit Ministry Team (UMT), which is made up of a chaplain and a chaplain assistant. Chaplains perform or provide for the religious needs for the soldiers they serve.

Chaplains are the pastors to your sons and daughters, husbands and wives. Military chaplains do all those typical pastoral duties like counseling, performing marriages and funerals, leading and planning worship, performing sacraments, attending meetings, and doing administration work. We practice ministry in a military culture to Soldiers and their families and to all the people that go to support the Army. The military culture is like what I imagine life must have been like in the 1950s. The key words that drive this culture are respect, discipline, and values. Live by those key words and you'll do fine in this culture. Forget them and you'll get in a lot of trouble very quickly.

The greatest joy I have in this ministry is just helping Soldiers. These men and women in uniform are just like you and me with the same challenges, struggles, and successes. It's an honor to be asked by a young 19-year-old man far from home, "Sir, can I talk with

you?” In confidentiality and by God’s love and grace the Soldier shares his precious and unique story. We talk about everything from growing up to girlfriends, spouses, children, military life and the joys and challenges that brings. I serve a sacred and trusted role—one that I’m proud to serve.

The chaplain’s role is not to impose his or her own personal view of religion onto Soldiers, but rather it is to facilitate the Soldier’s right to express and practice his or her religious freedom, even in a hostile and sometimes combative environment. Our role is to bring God’s grace and presence even upon a battlefield. Hopefully, Soldiers see in me the love of God as I provide ministry. Our work here is invaluable. Commanders, even if they are not religious, know the value a good chaplain brings to the unit.

Thank you, the people of our nation, for allowing me and all UMTs to serve in the military. And thank you to Presbyterian pastors and lay leaders, elders, members of congregations, and staff in presbyteries, synods, and at the General Assembly level for all you do for the church. I know the sacrifices you make for our Lord. I know the hard but rewarding work it is to build up the Church. We have a saying here in 2ID that is most appropriate: “같이잡시다” which means, “we go together.”

Lately, it seems I get to my room around 2000 hrs, or 8 p.m. Then, like most other dads, I eat something and begin watching TV in my recliner. Soon, the Z-man appears. Some nights when I happen to be awake around 2300 hrs, I hear the tune of TAPS from a bugle being played over the loud speakers reminding everyone it’s time to go to bed. I really like the words to that well-know tune:

Day is done, gone the sun  
from the hills, from the lake, from the sky;  
All is well, safely rest, God is nigh.  
Thanks and praise for our days  
‘neath the sun, neath the stars, neath the sky;  
As we go, this we know, God is nigh.

*The Reverend Joey Byrd is a Presbyterian minister serving our church as an active duty military chaplain.*