

THE ARMY CHAPLAIN ASSISTANT – A REVIEW OF THE US MODEL –

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The institution of the army chaplain assistant is the specificity developed within the US Armed Forces, combining military and religious authority in one person. Following the US model, the army chaplain assistants have also been introduced to the chaplaincy service in the Serbian Armed Forces. This review examines the institutional framework, the history of development, the sphere of activity and authority, as well as the status of the army chaplain assistants according to international law. The advantages and disadvantages of the US model are presented, as well.

Key Words: army chaplain assistant, authority, religious needs, Geneva Convention

Introduction

In all official documents, the US Armed Forces (the Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard) pay great attention to meeting the religious needs of their personnel. The basis for this can be found in the Constitution that guarantees religious freedom to all citizens. On July 29, 1775, the Continental Congress defined that the army chaplains were an integral part of the Armed Forces in the US units and they should be paid their remuneration. Therefore, the existence of the army chaplains is considered to be a tradition, and also the need, since history has confirmed the positive impact that they have on the morale and mental health of the members of the units in which they operate.

The guarantee of religious freedoms used to be and still is one of the main foundations of the US society and the reason for the emigration of a large number of first immigrants from Europe to the colonies at that time, and then the newly-established United States.¹ It also guarantees the right of those who declare themselves as atheists to be and remain so. This principle of guaranteeing religious freedoms is assumed by the Armed Forces, although they introduce the possibility of their temporary suspension.² Restrictions on exercising religious rights in the Armed Forces are conditioned by military needs, that is,

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¹ The First Amendment to the US Constitution

² The First Amendment to the Constitution and Army Regulation 165–1

they are present in the case of: the impact on the combat readiness of a unit or an individual, the unity of a unit, discipline, health and/or security of a unit and an individual.³

The religious support in all branches of the US Armed Forces is organized on the basis of a unit ministry team (UMT) in brigades or lower organizational units and religious section (RS) in formation above brigade. UMT, which represents the basic unit, consists of at least one chaplain and one chaplain assistant, although it may be of a more complex form. Their task is to provide religious, spiritual and moral support to soldiers and their family members, and other employees in the Armed Forces that are part of their unit.⁴ More precisely, the teams operate in three directions:

- Unit support. This covers the unit to which a chaplain and a chaplain assistant are assigned or attached and it is normally the first priority of support.

- Area support. This covers soldiers, members of the joint force, and authorized civilians who are not a part of the assigned unit, but who operate within that unit's area of operations.

- Denominational or distinctive faith group support. This covers soldiers and other authorized persons of the chaplain's denomination.

UMTs adapt to the needs of a unit and its members.⁵ Due to the specific nature of the work they perform, UMT members can cooperate with the choir, the orchestra, religious teachers or the leaders of different religious groups while carrying out their activities. Furthermore, a chaplain and his assistant have clearly defined powers in order to have the ability to cover wider areas of action.⁶

Focusing its work on three basic core competencies: nurture the living, care for the wounded and honor the dead, the religious support in the US Armed Forces "constantly, thoroughly, systematically and responsibly takes care of meeting the religious needs of all."⁷ The specifics of these competencies cause and imply different activities.⁸ It is therefore necessary to approach their conduct with due respect, professionalism and a sense of religious specificity.

³ Processing Religious Accommodation Requests Requiring a Waiver to Army Uniform or Grooming Policies, Army Directive 2016-34, Secretary of the Army, Washington, Oct. 6, 2016

⁴ According to FM 1-05, the religious support encompasses five spheres: worship according to one's faith; seeking religious counsel and care; keeping holy days and observances; participating in rites, sacraments, and ordinances; practicing dietary laws.

⁵ Religious Support to the Army, FM 1-05, headlines 1-8, 5 October 2012, p. 1-2.

⁶ Religious Support: Army Chaplain Corps Activities, Army Regulations 165-1, Headquarters Department of the Army, Washington DC, Dec. 3, 2009, p. 10.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ The support includes various counseling and assistance in crises before, after, or when getting married, divorced, attempting or committing suicide of members of the Armed Forces or their family members, and in all other situations that can lead to the loss of self-esteem or self-confidence. Guided by the idea that the success of each military mission requires the commitment that exists only if there is self-confidence, and self-confidence cannot exist without the faith in yourself or God, the advocates of the religious clergy in the Armed Forces seek to involve chaplains and their assistants in as many trainings and seminars as possible, in order to help soldiers and officers, especially when they are engaged in missions abroad.

Care for the wounded refers to the support to the wounded, and their family members to cope with the situation, to accept and overcome the difficulties it implies. In case of wounding that will inevitably have a fatal outcome, the religious needs that are present when members of various religions are parting and preparing for death are met.

In addition, honoring the deceased/fallen soldiers, which includes military funerals, memorial ceremonies and commemoration, and cremation, is the most visible and the most sensitive form of the chaplaincy service, whether it is the service in chapels or near a graveyard, and they are paid special attention.

The US model

What distinguishes the US model of the chaplaincy service from the model of many other states is precisely the specificity of the army chaplain assistant. In addition, the position, powers and role of chaplains and their assistants are prescribed in detail by the bylaws issued by the Department of Defense.

Of course, the development of the institution and the expansion of the powers and duties of the chaplain assistant has taken place gradually. In the 19th century, that is, in 1866, it was determined that chaplains should choose and educate soldiers, who appear to be capable of mastering and then teaching elementary school subjects, to help educate soldiers in their units. In addition, the task of these people, was to take care of the official property of chaplains, to perform administrative tasks and to assist them in educational, religious and entertainment programs.

This method of selecting an assistant existed until December 28, 1909, when by the General Order No. 253 the chaplain assistant became a separate category of soldiers, who had to have high moral qualities. At the end of the war in Korea it became necessary for assistants to complete at least basic training for the chaplain assistant that lasts four weeks. This training was preceded by basic combat and basic administrative training that last nine weeks each. In 1966, the schools for the training of the army chaplain assistants were placed under the authority of the Center and school for the training of the army chaplain assistants, and in 1972 they were integrated into the NCO Education System (NCOES).

According to the definition contained in the US Army Job Description, the chaplain assistant is a person (male or female, without distinction), who provides daily assistance to the chaplain in performing rites and forming basic UMTs as a tactical element. These are daily activities in the country and during missions abroad. The activities of the army chaplain assistants can be divided into three basic groups: integrated support to the chaplain for all religious activities, initial spiritual work and guidance and establishment of basic contact with members of the unit and their families members.

So, the army chaplain assistants are soldiers, that is, non-commissioned officers with special expertise and competencies. According to this model, they have two duties: to assist in performing rites and other religious activities and building and strengthening trust with members of their unit and their families, and as the armed soldiers to protect the basic unit (UMT) they form with the chaplain. The exact description of the duties of the chaplain assistant as an armed member of the team or soldier is the following: "protection for UMT during movement; additional protection during the conduct of religious activities in the area of operation; additional defense, when necessary, of friendly units and positions; defense of wounded soldiers and caregivers while providing life-saving; and not participating in combat operations."⁹ Supervision over this operation is carried out by the chaplain, so that his assistant would not endanger the basic team and the reputation of a religious unit by exceeding authority. In other words, the assistants are those who carry weapons and protect chaplains and other protected categories

⁹ Religious Support Handbook for the Unit Ministry Team, Training Circular (TC) 1-05, Headquarters Department of the Army, Washington DC, May 10, 2005, p. 2-8.

during combat (since these categories are protected under international law), while out of combat they help in providing spiritual support.

In order to perform both aspects of their duties equally well, the army chaplain assistants complete two levels of training. The first level is the basic combat training that is the same for all US Armed Forces soldiers, and the second one is the training of a religious administrative worker which includes: keeping records according to the military regulations, having certain typing speed, and training in the sphere of religious-moral-psychological assistance lasting for eight weeks.

However, due to the large amount of work and unforeseen circumstances that require their presence and expertise, the assistants will rarely, and only with the consent of the chaplain, be appointed for regular military tasks.

The duties of the army chaplain assistants include: coordination, provision of data and analysis that they submit to the chaplain in their unit; informing the commander of the unit and senior officers about the religious specifics of the area in which the unit is located; care for the protection and preservation of the status of privileged communication (confidentiality in communication) of soldiers, non-commissioned officers and officers and members of their families with UMT; intervention in the case of crisis; coordination of treatment in the case of events with traumatic consequences; providing counseling in the case of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD); assistance in performing urgent religious rites; assessment of the unit morale; care of property and equipment for carrying out religious rites, as well as the multipurpose space for performing religious rites of all religious groups.

The army chaplain assistants are not officers, which brings them closer to other soldiers, because they are more open for communication. They are the first instance for soldiers to turn to for advice or support. According to the assessment of the army chaplain assistants, the soldier will, according to the type of assistance that he needs, be sent to the psychological team, his military adviser or chaplain.

At the same time, it is important to emphasize that the assistants do not have rank or the function of representative of a religious group. This means that a person, who outside the Armed Forces performs the function of a preacher or chaplain of certain religious group, can apply for the army chaplain assistant, but from the moment of joining the army, completing training and taking over the role of the assistant, he is the soldier and he cannot preach in the name of and/or for the benefit of his religious group, and he cannot perform religious rites (prayers, weddings, funerals, etc.) that are the area of responsibility of the chaplain, regardless of the fact that if he had stayed in the civilian life he would have been authorized for this. Exceptionally, in his free time and under the condition that this does not affect the performance of his regular duties, the assistant may participate in the rites or activities of the religious group he belongs to, but as a layman and with the consent of the responsible chaplain. If the unit, where he serves, needs assistance of a representative of the religious group, which the assistant belongs to, the approval for the assistance of the army chaplain assistant may be exceptionally required, but he will then act as a layman and under the conditions that are the same for all representatives of religious groups, whose assistance is required.

To perform the duty of the army chaplain assistant it is necessary to know and respect the religious customs of different religious groups, whereby neither personal

religious convictions of the assistant are important nor the religious affiliation of the chaplain that he assists. Namely, the duty of UMT is to help each individual in meeting his religious needs. This includes various religious activities, the organization of services and ceremonies, the procurement of religious literature, the provision of adequate food or assistance in establishing contact with the representatives of a particular religious group. This care for the needs of members of all recognized religious groups (as long as they are not violent or destructive) to the advocates of this model leads to the real equality of members of different religions and religious groups.¹⁰

The army chaplain assistants are armed and they wear a uniform. They cannot receive compensation or gifts for their engagement in addition to regular income they receive through the salary paid by the Armed Forces they belong to.

Furthermore, they are both responsible to the chaplain, whose assistants they are and directly to the assistant of the chief chaplain according to the command line of the army chaplain assistants.¹¹

Advantages and disadvantages of the US model

Every established model of the chaplaincy service that exists today including the US one has its advantages and disadvantages. First of all, when it comes to the advantages of this model, it should be emphasized that in this way it is possible to provide continuous assistance and support in meeting all and different religious needs of every individual who serves in the Armed Forces as a civilian or serviceman or a member of the family of such a person. Bearing in mind that a large number of members of the US Armed Forces are in war zones, daily availability and the possibility of requiring and obtaining religious consolation is of great importance.

The scope of work of the chaplain and his assistant is clearly and completely differentiated. The chaplain is always an officer and his duties are rather religious ones. The chaplain assistant is a soldier or non-commissioned officer, and his duties encompass providing support and physical protection of the chaplain. In the society that is totally class conscious and divided, the fact that the assistant is not an officer helps soldiers to ask him for advice or help more easily.

The assistant performs all administrative and logistic tasks, leaving the chaplain freedom to devote himself to religious and advisory work, which is the greatest contribution of this system to the work of the chaplain.

Although the scope of activities of the chaplains and their assistants is extremely wide, it is precisely the number of accepted religious groups and denominations that make this work much more complex. Namely, in addition to officially recognized religions and religious groups, the Armed Forces also recognize and enable religious rights and freedoms to the marginal groups such as Nordic pagans, vegans, animalists and similar groups.

¹⁰ Today 120 religious groups and religions enjoy the status of the recognized religious group in the US Armed Forces.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

Despite respect for religious beliefs that the US Armed Forces propagate and guarantee to all its members, there is an exception: the army chaplain assistants are the only category that does not have the possibility to be conscientious objectors, that is the possibility not to carry and use weapons, since they are expected to protect members of their team and all privileged categories, and above all the chaplains, who are unarmed. In this case the religious principle is annulled for the sake of the higher interest – guarantee of life and security of a team member; that is, there is the principle of supremacy of the military over the religious. Therefore, according to the Geneva Convention, and unlike the chaplains, their assistants do not enjoy protection because they are armed members of the military units. With the obligation to consider their personal religious convictions to be of secondary importance, the army chaplain assistants may find themselves in a situation to assist the chaplain, whose religious group or convictions differ or are completely confronted with their own religious beliefs. However, neither the chaplain nor his assistant have the right to object to such a situation.

When it comes to the disadvantages of this system, it means the constraints the army chaplain assistants encounter. Namely, their function is described in two words: provide and advise. Although their field of activity is broad and includes both military and religious aspects, the assistants are in both of these fields conditioned by the consent of the chaplain they form the team to undertake any independent action or initiative.

Conclusion

For more than hundred years, the system of the army chaplain assistants has been officially established and developed in the US Armed Forces. This long-standing practice has precisely defined the powers and obligations of members of this specific profession within the Armed Forces. Certainly, the systemic support to the equality of religious groups and the funds for meeting various religious needs within the budget have contributed to this development.¹² Therefore, the chaplains and their assistants are expected to be open to accept new teachings or religious choices, to spread the ideas about co-operation and equality of all, and also to adapt to the changing conditions they work in. Moreover, they can act during regular activities in peacetime, and also during armed conflicts in distant and unknown areas, within one of the warring parties or as members of peace support missions and humanitarian assistance forces.

The advantages of this system are undoubted because the chaplain is free from administrative work and he has the freedom of pastoral work. Therefore, the idea of the army chaplain assistant has been transferred to other states and their Armed Forces including Serbia.

The main disadvantage of this model is the fact that the absolute equalization of all leads to the situation that individuals, groups or churches are brought into a truly inequitable position. Namely, the teaching of some churches and religious groups does not

¹² According to certain data, 120 different churches, groups and movements enjoy the status of the recognized religious group in the US Armed Forces, and the annual budget of a UMT totals around 1.5 million dollars.

allow the use of multipractic or the so-called multipurpose rooms for religious rites and it is against the participation of women in ceremonies. Nevertheless, in the US military bases, all communities that have given consent to their clergy for joining the army in the ranks of the chaplains have agreed to such space. Furthermore, all denominations will unconditionally accept the female assistant to the chaplain in the US Armed Forces. This is another example of a canonical and necessary conflict, which has been resolved by accepting the most practical solution.

Once again, it should be emphasized – the army chaplain assistants are always and only soldiers, that is, non-commissioned officers with special authority, whose personal religious convictions are of secondary importance.

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