

Author, Lyle W. Dorsett, reviewed by Chaplain (Lieutenant Colonel) Stan Giles, Tennessee Army National Guard

Even after seven decades, there is still no shortage of new World War II histories, but this is the first I've seen that focuses on the chaplaincy. It's an easy read and generous toward the career field, which is no surprise given that Lyle Dorsett has a doctorate in history and is both a rector in the Episcopal Church and a military veteran.

The book consists primarily of a series of anecdotes collected from memoirs, official reports, and a few interviews. It follows a chronological sequence of the period starting with recruitment and training, moving to the Pacific front and then shifting to the European theater and then back to the Pacific. The sequence makes sense and serves as a helpful summary to a beginning student of the war.

The sheer numbers of chaplains required for the war effort is surprising, but not so much so when placed in the context of the overall war effort. Like today, clergy from all over America volunteered and then, as with now, age waivers were often granted to gain diversity. However, that goal was never completely met, as white Protestants were a disproportionate majority.

I found the information on the training of chaplains to be most interesting. Dorsett makes the observation that not only was the military the first government entity to be officially desegregated (1947), but it was the chaplain service itself which was the first to desegregate training (1942). Assuming this is true, I think it is noteworthy for it speaks volumes about our shared tradition of seeing all people as created in God's image.

In spite of an aggravating tendency to refer to chaplains as "sky pilots" and "chappies," Lyle Dorsett does a good job of placing chaplains in the context of their call to ministry and the struggle that comes with living out that call in a military context. We must have a foot in both the world of the church/synagogue and the military. And like today there were both effective chaplains and "problem" chaplains, but as a whole the author argues that they were effective

and certainly crucial in keeping the fighting soldier fit for service. Chaplains seemed to have been well regarded and, in fact, had a much higher-than-average casualty rate.

The book includes an excellent chapter on chaplains who were POWs, one of whom, Chaplain Robert Taylor, became the first Chief of Chaplains of the Air Force.

I found two aspects of World War II chaplaincy interesting. First is the age issue, which is necessary given our calling and education, but also very noticeable when we must physically keep up with troops often twenty years (or more?) younger than we are. Our predecessors also struggled, and this brings me a bit of comfort.

Second, like today it seemed that effective chaplains walked a fine line between being an officer and a chaplain, between identifying with enlisted troops while serving as an officer. It's not an easy line to walk. Dorsett tells of Father Ignatius Maternowski, a tough, energetic Polish priest who was extremely well liked by the enlisted troops, but he ran afoul of his supervisors because he didn't fit their profile of an officer. "On more than one occasion he offered to put the gloves on with officers who interfered with his ministry or made wise-cracks about confession." (page 154) I was reminded of a chaplain I once served with who had excellent ministry with the enlisted, but ran afoul of a supervisor over picayune matters.

Anyone who has deployed recently can identify with the issues that were common to troops then. These included the fear of death, chaotic home situations, and sexual impurity of one sort or another.

Something of a surprise to me, and I think of relevance to chaplains today, was that troops worried about their economic future as they faced separation from the military. Some didn't want the war to end! With the Great Recession being so recent, and with millions of GIs entering the work force, job prospects indeed did not look bright. One said to a chaplain, "...what am I going to do when I put on civies? Who's going to help make a civilian out of me again?" (page 231) One chaplain said his primary job became "preparing men and women to be spiritually prepared to return to civilian life." We may have more in common with our predecessors than we think.

Finally, the war had the unintended consequence of forcing a form of inter-denominationalism that at the time was mostly unknown in American religious culture. This engagement ran in both

directions; the Southern Baptist from Texas worked side-by-side with the Catholic priest from Chicago. A Jewish rabbi who'd hardly been out of the Bronx shared living quarters with a United Methodist minister from Denver. The military chaplaincy allows us to engage with clergy from other denominations, and most of us today, like earlier chaplains, would concede that those experiences leave permanent, and mostly positive marks on our thinking and on our preaching.

Stan Giles is endorsed by the Evangelical Free Church of America. He holds advanced degrees in theology and history.