Priest, Pastor or Porthole: the role of a Navy chaplain

Chaplain Christine Senini, RAAF

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Introduction

What do chaplains do? What is their role and their effectiveness? When asked about chaplaincy, many Defence leaders reply something like, ‘I don’t know what they do, but whatever they do seems to work’. For some people outside Defence, and maybe even inside, ‘the clerical collar suggests an ecclesiastical role that is about the Church as an institution, making it difficult for them to recognise that we may have other gifts, roles and ministries to offer’.2

Chaplains are not historically good at formally substantiating their value, preferring to rely on demonstrated achievements at a local, informal level. Many sailors and officers do not understand or appreciate a chaplain’s role unless they have had reason to seek them out for guidance, support or religious services. This recognition is often modified for those who have held a command, divisional officer or senior sailor position, when interactions with chaplains about personnel or morale issues are more common.

This paper will explore what it is that RAN chaplains do and how they do it. It will show how they participate in the organisational mission to ‘fight and win at sea’. It will also seek to demystify some of the understandings surrounding chaplaincy both at sea and ashore. Its aim is to encourage Defence personnel to consider effective military chaplains as an important asset in both reducing and resolving personal, personnel and organisational issues.

Religious obligations

Defence Instruction (General) PERS 26-2 stipulates that ‘ADF members are encouraged to pursue their own religious beliefs and practices, subject to the requirements of ADF operations’.4 This understanding is given further emphasis in Defence Instruction (Navy) PERS 62-1, which states:

Attention to the spiritual needs of members of the Navy is a matter of the highest importance. Commanding Officers are to ensure that members, whatever their religious affiliation, are provided with the opportunity and facilities for the proper observance of the practices of their religion.5

As trained religious and liturgical practitioners, chaplains provide these opportunities and facilities on behalf of their Commanding Officer. This is important, as most leaders in the RAN do not have a broad experience or knowledge of the diversity of traditional religions and newer faith groups within the ADF.

There is often a misunderstanding that because people do not regularly attend church, or any other type of religious meeting place, they do not believe in God. For example, studies have shown that most members of Generations X and Y—which would obviously include a sizeable proportion of the ADF—subscribe to a general belief in God and utilise religious practices, such as prayer, but prefer to remain religiously unaffiliated.6 They often prefer to have an eclectic or ambiguous understanding of personal faith, that is, to live ‘secular lives with sacred hearts’.7

Chaplains have an essential role in assisting Commanding Officers to provide observance opportunities for those with emerging understandings of faith and religious practices, as well as members with more traditional convictions and customs. Regardless of their own religious convictions, assisting all members in the pursuance of their spirituality and in helping them integrate their faith beliefs or obligations with ADF requirements is a chaplain’s duty.8
This assistance can be wide-ranging, sensitive and challenging. For example, a chaplain assisted with the introduction of a Sikh sailor to RAN Recruit School, where issues of head coverings and facial hair took on religious, morale, and occupational health and safety significance. Chaplains consistently contact local mosques, temples and meetinghouses on behalf of interested members. Due to a specific postmodern need, one ship’s chaplain briefed Command about the nature and traditions of the Jedi faith.9 In times of deployment, chaplains also make connections with local religious leaders, in order to assist deployed personnel to maintain their religious practices. These connections may also develop mutual cultural and religious awareness or provide contacts with local community leaders that can assist a mission’s broader humanitarian aim.

Some religions have significant holy days or seasons that adherents should observe. ADF personnel are not to be employed on recognised holy days other than on necessary duty.10 Yet, most religions also allow their followers to seek release from religious duties when there are military operational requirements. Chaplains can advise on religious requirements, expectations and exemptions. They should be a religious ‘subject matter expert’, providing pertinent, prudent and practical advice in a timely manner.

Chaplains also conduct, or arrange others to conduct, religious and sacramental services. These would include Sunday church services, Holy Eucharist, Reconciliation, and Scattering of Ashes. Services can be denominational, ecumenical or multi-faith. Chaplains also regularly celebrate weddings, baptisms and funerals for members and their families.

Given the nomadic nature of military life, many members and their families find it difficult to maintain connections with a local faith community. Chaplains are a constant presence in posting locations. This means that members have a religious point of contact to gain information about local faith groups, obtain sacramental support for life passages, and receive religious instruction.12 Chaplains increase the opportunities for members to meet their personal, family and spiritual needs, thereby reinforcing wellbeing, character development and directly supporting capability.

It is the values and beliefs that a person holds that are significant factors of toughness, flexibility and discernment. Interestingly, a significant percentage of studies examining religious involvement and mental health have discovered that religious people experience better mental health and are more resilient than those who are not religious.13 The chaplain’s contribution as a religious provider not only helps sustain the individual but also can assist members to be a better resource for Defence.

**Morale and moral, spiritual and religious wellbeing**

Command has responsibility for the health, welfare, morale and discipline of assigned personnel.14 In order to execute these responsibilities, Command relies on others, including chaplains, to support them. Chaplains have a particular task to ‘promote the moral, spiritual, and religious wellbeing of all personnel through personal contact and friendship and by encouraging participation in religious activities’. They also are required to ‘advise their Commanding Officer on all matters relating to the moral, spiritual and religious wellbeing of naval personnel and their families’. These duties include an understanding that:

> When young men and women enter the Navy, they are separated from the influence of home and the local place of worship with which they may have been associated. It is important, therefore, to both the member and the Navy that ample opportunity is given for spiritual development. The personal qualities of character which ensure high standards of conduct and which inspire courage and self-sacrifice in a crisis can be developed by religious faith.17

Military doctrine recognises that morale, moral resilience and wellbeing all have a direct effect on military effectiveness.16 Ethical leadership balances competing interests, including personnel concerns. In numerous ways, chaplains assist their Commanding Officer by promoting positive morale, inspiring confidence and cheerfulness, and by reinforcing Navy values. Chaplains can also enrich senior leadership by providing additional moral insight, ethical advice, alternate perspectives or welfare recommendations.
Examples include instructing in subjects such as ethics or moral values, taking a proactive personal interest in all of a ship’s company, or participating in Command briefs by supplying a different or divergent personnel perspective that enhances debate and decision making. Chaplains may also present talks about managing life’s challenges, facilitating faith or religious requests, or be available to listen to individual’s concerns and expectations.

An unusual historical example of supporting morale and religious wellbeing occurred in 1721:

When the pirate Captain Bartholomew Roberts in the Royal Fortune was operating off the coast of Guinea, he took prisoner a dergymnan on board as one of his prizes. Roberts endeavoured to persuade him to become the Royal Fortune’s chaplain, assuring him that his only duties would be to say prayers and make punch, but he begged to be allowed to decline the appointment. At length he was released, after being robbed of three prayer books and a corkscrew, all of which were badly needed on board.  

It is still a chaplain’s role to determine ‘what is badly needed on board’ so that the wellbeing of a ship’s company can be effectively maintained and developed. Although many needs are similar across ships and establishments, local contexts and cultures do differ. What works on one ship may not work on another. Chaplains use their pastoral and organisational training, as well as their broad life experience, to access opportunities that make, and contribute to, constant informal cultural and needs assessments. Together with other key roles, such as the executive officer, ship’s warrant officer, medical officer and physical training instructor, chaplains should proactively determine what is needed in order to most successfully support and sustain a ship’s company.

A chaplain is only directly responsible for him or herself. As noted in a recent ADF Journal article, ‘this is appropriate and deliberate ... [and] this lack of direct responsibility gives the freedom to be responsible, in a general sense, for every person in the unit, and often for people outside the unit’. Under their Commanding Officer’s authority, this relative freedom releases chaplains to utilise various proactive and pre-emptive methods to contribute to the wellbeing of personnel and their families.

These methods include visiting workspaces, joining in ship’s activities, organising cultural visits while alongside an overseas port and assisting in the ship’s social events or ancillary duties, such as editor for the ship’s family newsletter. Of course, chaplains are always available for a chat. And through all of this, the morale and the moral, spiritual and religious wellbeing of the ship’s company is paramount.

Character, life skilling and leadership training

Defence desires that members exhibit the personal qualities, flexibility and resilience that most effectively correspond with organisational objectives, values and interests. In 2009, former Chief of Navy, Vice Admiral Crane, endorsed the Navy values and ten signature behaviours, as vital for a professional work environment ‘that makes and executes strategic decisions, supports people during and beyond their service, and empowers everyone to make a respected contribution’.  

RAN character instruction, ‘life-skilling’ lessons and leadership training all seek to inculcate the RAN-agreed values and behaviours. Chaplains instruct, model and mentor in all these areas and are instrumental in developing and implementing life skilling. These programs encourage positive character qualities that enhance interpersonal skills, nurture personal growth and develop leadership competence.

Chaplains recognise that good moral character does not only belong to those who are religious or spiritual. However, ‘the personal qualities of character that can ensure high standards of conduct and which inspire courage and self-sacrifice in a crisis can be developed by religious faith’. Initial entry training subjects, such as ‘values’ and ‘ethics’, typically instructed by chaplains, explore all aspects of a member’s being including their spirituality. Life-skilling subjects, such as ‘beliefs and low self esteem’ and ‘assertive behaviour’, also demonstrate a chaplain’s commitment to helping members explore major life issues and develop skills and character traits that will enhance their professional career and personal life.
Many chaplains are routinely involved in leadership and promotion courses, post-in orientations (including suicide awareness presentations), pre-deployment training and post-deployment briefings. As noted in a recent history of chaplains in the RAN, ‘ethical training and the imparting of humane values in a pluralistic country like Australia cannot be solely confined to chaplains, be they Christian or, in the future, multi-faith. But neither should that ethical imperative neglect or marginalise a religious dimension’.24 Chaplains should have a significant role in encouraging, forming and undergirding religious faith and moral character development.

Values provide a compass to keep us moving in the right direction.25 A chaplain’s presence can act as a moral compass. Examples include during runs ashore, informal group conversations, mess functions, routine duties and briefings. Anecdotally, chaplains are routinely told by members of a ship’s company that people tend to swear and gossip less, and act more respectfully to one another, when the chaplain is about. Repeated habits, virtues and behaviours form moral character. The American experience of rehabilitating Abu Ghraib prison reinforced this understanding. During this period, chaplains were instructed:

To make themselves as present as possible in the lives and duties of the soldiers. This would do two things .... First, soldiers would find the chaplains accessible and more willing to engage them about their spiritual lives. Just as importantly, the chaplains would become what Taylor called ‘a moral influence by presence’. He instructed the chaplains to be there at the change of shifts, when prisoners were moved, when interrogations took place, and as soldiers fulfilled the most mundane duties .... It worked.26

Each year chaplains conduct memorial services at Commonwealth war cemeteries, as well as ANZAC Day and Remembrance Day services. These occur at ADF bases, community events, at sea, and around the world. We recall the events of particular world wars as well as the many conflicts since. We admire the moral character and attitudes demonstrated by those who fought for peace and defended our country. We recommit to similar ideals and values. We are reminded of the fragility of this life. As we commemorate and recollect, we also assure those who serve today that their service is valued and will not be forgotten.

Because of their training in ritual and public ceremonies, and their intimate knowledge of the military, chaplains have an intrinsic role in the organisation of these services. Chaplains ensure the necessary connections are made and that honour is given to all. The effective leadership of Defence chaplains sustains the dignity and power of these ceremonies.

A pastoral and counselling ministry

Many who are on the edges of Church life, or who would normally never seek spiritual or religious support, do seek chaplains as friends, helpers and guides. Most times, pastoral conversations begin with the sailor or officer saying something like ‘I’m not religious but I would really like to come and have a chat’. Chaplains recognise and respect that when a member approaches them, the person may be of a different religion or of no religion.

Interestingly, most members do reveal that they either belong to a faith group or have a general belief in God or a sense of spirituality, even if they do not choose to express this in the form of a specific religion. It is in the living, working, playing, eating, sleeping, deploying and potentially dying with the rest of a ship’s company that chaplains earn the permission and privilege of entering into the intimate aspects of people’s lives.

Members choose to see a chaplain because of their accessibility, informality, credibility and confidentiality. Chaplains, because they also wear a uniform, are seen by members as ‘one of us’, as someone who understands the rewards and challenges of military life. A significant number of pastoral encounters and counselling conversations are in response to an ad hoc meeting in a passageway or on a sporting field.
One of the many strengths of Navy chaplaincy is that chaplains are available immediately, usually in person or at the end of a dedicated duty phone. They are available for a quick chat or a longer appointment without lengthy waiting periods or mandatory paperwork. If needed, a chaplain is not restricted to a scheduled time slot but may spend several hours or even a whole day with just one person. This is especially significant for training establishments and ships at sea or on deployment.

Chaplains complete courses in pastoral counselling as part of their undergraduate theological training and ministry formation. Core subjects include relationships, grief and loss, and life’s passages. Some also continue with postgraduate courses in pastoral theology, counselling or psychology. One of the challenges for chaplains is the ‘need to be proactive and claim their “core business” of pastoral care and its components of counselling and attention to life issues, especially relationship and bereavement counselling’.27

As experienced pastoral carers and trained counsellors, chaplains may offer a welcoming place for members to express their feelings, process their thoughts and explain their actions. A chaplain’s office should be a place of sanctuary where people can feel safe to cry, get angry, swear, speculate, blame, vent or ‘catastrophise’. This is particularly important for those who feel vulnerable or disempowered.

Chaplains are more interested in being with or ‘alongside’ a person than they are about ‘doing’ or fixing their problem. Effective chaplains ask questions to assist the individual in personal discovery and awareness. They are able to provide information, explain how systems work, suggest opportunities to explore, share a different perspective or simply listen. If suitable, chaplains may offer a prayer or other sacramental services.

A chaplain’s presence can be a calming influence that enables the member to compose their chaotic thoughts and emotions. The person feels better because they have been listened to and been shown respect. It is in the sharing of their experiences that the member feels validated and valuable. With encouragement and time, people often discern the answers for themselves. The emphasis for a productive chaplain is building relationships of compassion, integrity, trust and acceptance that create a more constructive outcome for the individual and the organisation.

Chaplaincy support is available to naval personnel and their families. Chaplains visit families as a normal function of their pastoral duties, as well as in times of grief, injury, illness, separation, relationship breakdown or loss. They assist in compassionate and emergency matters as required. Chaplains also conduct hospital calls, visit members in cells or detention, and attend Board of Inquiries to offer pastoral support.28

Chaplains help members and their families celebrate their joys. These may include the birth of a new baby, receiving a much desired posting or promotion, or buying a new home. A broad understanding of a pastoral and counselling ministry empowers chaplains to be involved in a member’s ‘whole of life’. In turn, chaplains provide the ADF with a distinctive personnel resource with proven effectiveness.

Together with

Chaplains exercise their specialist duties alongside the Defence Community Organisation, medical personnel, psychologists, divisional staff and others. As noted in a recent article in ADF Health, ‘it is incumbent on all professionals responsible for the care of service personnel and their families, including chaplains, social workers, psychologists and medical officers, to be willing to work in cooperation rather than exclusively’.29 As a flexible multidisciplinary approach, this collaborative and holistic partnership will continue to contribute to a strong and resilient ADF.

As trained members of ‘Critical Incident Mental Health Support’ teams, chaplains also perform the function of mental health providers. This authorises them to provide psycho-education, psychological first aid and supervised individual screening.30 This may include facilitation of appropriate prevention strategies, including briefings and support services. In times of a critical incident or a potentially
traumatic event, chaplains are able to provide basic critical incident mental health support advice to both Command and personnel.

They can also provide ship liaison with critical incident mental health support coordinators or responders who may have to travel over some time and distance to join a ship at sea. At the scene of an incident or event, a chaplain can also provide a comforting presence for personnel, which then enables mental health professionals to operate more efficiently. This early support by chaplains provides another capability that may help mitigate and alleviate possible psychological difficulties.

For many people, the thought of contacting a psychologist or social worker can initially be daunting. Instead, many members begin by approaching a chaplain because they know them and because of a trust in a chaplain’s ‘God-in-confidence’ care. A chaplain is able to listen to their concerns and inform them of other Defence care and support options. If warranted, the chaplain can facilitate access to appropriate referral sources for assessment and continue to care pastorally for the member long term as they access other programs and services. This is especially important when a member discloses suicide ideation or self-harm, where chaplains are often the first point of contact for such revelations.

Under Defence Community Organisation tasking and coordination, chaplains are appropriately skilled members of teams that perform the notification of ADF and non-ADF casualties to the primary emergency contact, next-of-kin and other approved persons. Indeed, the relevant Defence Instruction stipulates that ‘the officer making personal contact with the primary emergency contact is to be accompanied by an ADF Chaplain or Minister of Religion’.

After the notification officer has formally conveyed the official information, a chaplain would usually be available to offer immediate pastoral care and support to those present. This may take the form of listening to the shock or distress, helping to arrange for someone to come and stay, making cups of tea, assuring them of Defence’s support through the Defence Community Organisation, sharing a prayer or hearing stories about the deceased or casualty. Primarily, it is about being with people as they ache. Frequently, those grieving begin to ask existential type questions at this time, or ask questions about funerals, which chaplains have training in, and experience with, to answer carefully. These initial conversations are integral in helping people to begin their grief and healing process well.

The chaplain also has an important role in helping the notification officer to prepare to be the compassionate ‘bearer of bad news’ and to be with him or her after the experience. Often the officer will be uncertain as to how best to convey the information. A chaplain’s guidance as to methods and style that are likely to be most effective, normal reactions or key things to avoid can give confidence and clarity. It may also involve undertaking a role-play beforehand. Usually it includes encouragement and support so that the officer feels strengthened to undertake their difficult role. Often it involves sharing significant time with the notification officer during the return journey back to the ship or establishment. This provides a safe space for the officer to explore contemporaneously his or her own reactions to this demanding role. For most, it is a disturbing experience. A chaplain’s presence can ease many concerns and calm apprehensions.

**Action station**

Navy chaplains are a peculiar branch. They are the only category that is afforded a designation and not a military rank, demonstrated by there being no RAN chaplain shoulder boards included in the ADF badges of rank and special insignia poster. A RAN chaplain is a commissioned officer with the title of Chaplain, Senior Chaplain or Principal Chaplain. As such, chaplains are special in that they are subject to command but have no command authority.

This deliberate positioning of chaplains allows them to be alongside personnel rather than exercising authority over them. It actively promotes the pastoral understanding of the chaplain being ‘friend and advisor of all on board’. Their station also authorises chaplains to speak directly with their Commanding Officer regarding chaplaincy matters—and with greater objectivity and autonomy. This can help resolve issues at the lowest level of intervention. As noted in the *ADF Journal* article mentioned earlier, ‘a tough
chaplain with moral fortitude and courage will save lives. No unit can ask for more from their chaplain’.34 This freedom sometimes means that the chaplain has to have the courage to speak up assertively about an issue, especially if no-one else is willing or able, even if it risks making the chaplain unpopular.

At sea, chaplains must report to their action station as directed by their Commanding Officer. Although considered a non-combatant under the Geneva Convention,35 chaplains may support and care for those in a combat role. This may range from helping members of a fire party to get dressed, assisting the medics as they treat the wounded, distributing water, serving in the galley or checking on the welfare and mental health of those closed up for long periods of time. In collaboration with the roving role of the executive officer and ship’s warrant officer, a chaplain’s ability to rove around the ship should promote good morale, enhance wellbeing, improve capability and contribute to effective information management.

It should also be remembered that a Commanding Officer’s posting is complex. When at sea, he or she shares the same risks as the ship’s company and endures long periods of separation from loved ones and support networks. Whether at sea or ashore, a Commanding Officer must be available to manage and lead 24 hours a day, cope with multiple situations and excessive workloads, and apply a range of generalist and specialist skills.

This can be a very lonely and tiring position. The chaplain may be the only person in their chain of command that the Commanding Officer feels comfortable talking to about his or her personal life, professional stresses and strains, concerns about decisions made or conflicts they are having with their senior officers. Lord Montgomery famously asserted that ‘I would as soon think of going into battle without my artillery as without my chaplains’.36 When a Commanding Officer has confidence in their chaplain, this pastoral relationship can positively support and sustain the Commanding Officer through the complexities and challenges of their command in a unique way.

Conclusion

Chaplains occupy large amounts of their time in building relationships and endeavouring to help others to live the ‘whole of life’ authentically. By demonstrating solidarity in the experiences and responsibilities of ship life, both at sea and ashore, RAN chaplains earn the privilege of being involved in the intimate and shared moments of Navy life.

As an integral and essential member of a ship’s company, they can enhance and strengthen the personal and professional lives of the ship’s company by actively utilising innovative and acknowledged methods. Effective RAN chaplains consistently contribute as ‘force multiplier’ specialists by being an intrinsic resource in reducing and resolving personal, personnel and organisational issues. They should also use their generalist expertise ‘to fight and win at sea’ by value adding, reducing the burdens of others and supporting capability.

Command must demand high standards from their chaplains. Just as an effective chaplain is a force multiplier, an ineffective chaplain can be a force reducer. Morale, capability or wellbeing may be threatened by an inadequate chaplain. In circumstances when a chaplain is not competent, productive or beneficial, it is imperative that the chaplain be reframed, retrained, replaced or, in some cases, removed.

Effective Defence chaplaincy requires a broad range and depth of interpersonal skills, military competencies, life experiences and specialist training. The RAN and other chaplaincy examples referred to in this article contain common principles and generic elements that are applicable to all ADF chaplains, albeit with their own denominational, local and organisational nuances. In exploring Navy chaplaincy, this paper has shown how military chaplains may uniquely contribute to the overall efficiency, capability and success of the ADF.

After serving as a federal agent in the Australian Federal Police, a congregational minister, and as the RAN’s first Permanent Navy female chaplain at various establishments and on several
ships, operations and exercises, Chaplain (Squadron Leader) Christine Senini now works as a RAAF Specialist Reserves chaplain at RAAF Base Richmond.

Most recently, she established the position of Chaplain Christmas Island (Australia) on behalf of the Anglican and Uniting Churches, providing chaplaincy to the local community, ADF members, AFP personnel, and the staff and asylum seekers at the immigration detention centre. She is completing her PhD studies at Charles Sturt University, focusing on RAN chaplaincy in relation to pastoral, liturgical and public theology.

NOTES

1 This paper was successfully peer reviewed in being considered for publication in the ADF Journal, albeit the Board decided to publish it instead as a Commander’s Paper.


5 DI(N) PERS 62-1, p. 1.


8 DI(G) PERS 26-2, p.1.

9 The Jedi religion is inspired by the moral codes and principles of the fictional Jedi of the Star Wars series. It has no specific founder or central organised system. According to the 2011 census, the Jedi faith is growing in popularity in Australia, with significantly more people identifying with the Jedi faith than a number of other religions, such as Scientology. More information can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/jedifaith?sk=wall&filter=12> accessed 1 May 2013.


11 Other faith group chaplains may be appointed when numbers of self-declared adherents in the Permanent Navy meet a minimum 100 for a Reserve Navy chaplain and 250 for a Permanent Navy chaplain: see Annex A to DI(N) PERS 62–1, Memorandum Of Arrangements Between The Commonwealth of Australia Represented By The Chief Of The Defence Force And Heads Of Churches Representatives, paragraph 12.
Religious Advisory Committee to the Services (RACS) is inaugurating an ‘Affiliated Representative Committee’ to which it is hoped that Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Latter Day Saints and Sikh representatives will be appointed (RACS Minutes, 4 September 2012, paragraph 6).


This is explored extensively in RAN, The RAN Leadership Ethic, Defence Publishing Service: Canberra, 2010.


‘Lifekilling’ is a registered brand name but is used here in a generic sense.


Stephen Mansfield, The Faith of the American Soldier, FrontLine: Lake Mary, 2005, pp. 154-6. Interestingly, the relative absence of the chaplain when the atrocities were occurring has been determined as a contributing factor to the decline of the prison conditions and adverse actions of the personnel.

Carl Aiken, Chaplaincy and Health Care in the ADF: the relationship between body, mind and soul, ADF Health: Journal of the Australian Defence Health Service, Vol. 9, 2008, p. 76.

RAN, Navy Values: serving Australia with pride, Defence Publishing Service: Canberra, 2009, p. 3.

Stephen Mansfield, The Faith of the American Soldier, FrontLine: Lake Mary, 2005, pp. 154-6. Interestingly, the relative absence of the chaplain when the atrocities were occurring has been determined as a contributing factor to the decline of the prison conditions and adverse actions of the personnel.

Carl Aiken, Chaplaincy and Health Care in the ADF, p. 76.


Di(N) PERS 62-1, p. 4.


