

The Military chaplain

by *Christian Braw*[†]

Resumé

Artikeln belyser fältprästens roll i ett värnpliktsförsvar. Fältprästen finns i organisationen, liksom läkaren, på grund av sin civila kompetens. I likhet med läkaren är hans närvaro vital för förbandsandan. Men han inte är självklar för alla. Därför är det ett primärt mål att han vinner förbandets förtroende, och i första hand chefens. Han verkar nämligen alltid på chefens uppdrag. För att vinna förtroende måste han vara fysiskt närvarande och synlig. Det blir han genom de uppgifter som ligger i marginalen, t ex som företrädare för socialtjänst, folkrätt och kultur. Ur det förtroende han vinner kan sedan hans uppgift som själasörjare ta gestalt.

THE MILITARY CHAPLAIN is first of all a clergyman. His basic commission is given by Jesus Christ. He has a civilian competence that is of importance to the national defence. In this, he is not different from the chaplains in National Health Service. His position is similar to that of a military doctor, whose main competence is likewise civilian. Doctors cure bodies, chaplains have the responsibility for the curing the souls, which is more complex, as it embraces spiritual realities as well as ethical guidance. The very presence of the military chaplains in the national defence implies a view of man as spiritual being, i.e., as more than body. It is a common military experience that the recognition of man as a spiritual being, in need of spiritual and ethical guidance, is an absolute necessity for all military activity, except in the very short term.

This means that the military chaplain, as well as the military doctor, has a well-founded identity. This is, however, not evident to all outsiders, and the national service differs from the professional defence in that it has a greater permanent inflow of outsiders. Each

year we will meet new contingents of young men and women, many of whom have had no or only a weak relation to the Christian Church. In my country about 80 % will be baptised, 50 % confirmed. Probably less than 30 % have attended a communion service since their confirmation – and now, in uniform, they will meet a clergyman face to face. As civilians they have, as most of them will think, been able to live quite well without spiritual guidance from the Christian Church. It takes time for them to realise that the soldier is in quite a different position, where he is in fact expected to give his life for his nation the very same day.

Different conditions

The difference between the life of school, university, and commerce on the one hand and military conditions on the other is identical with that of normal organisations compared to extreme organisations. Life as a soldier is that of extreme organisations, like that of a fire-brigade or surgeon's team, where the most difficult and unexpected situations will

occur suddenly and demand total involvement of each and everyone. This is the mentality of military life and the bond between all soldiers. That is why spiritual guidance is a necessity for them, but it will take time to convey this mentality to the new soldiers. If, therefore, the military chaplain is expected to make his contribution with the inspiration and initiative that is needed, he must have the support and encouragement of the commander and the officers.

Support and encouragement are, however, things which the military chaplain cannot demand himself. In many Western countries the experiences gained in peacekeeping and peace-enforcing missions have given new respect to the task of the military chaplain. He must be there when life touches extreme conditions. These experiences work in favour of the military chaplain, but the respect won by them must also correspond to the credibility of each military chaplain. What each military chaplain does or neglects to do affects the credibility of them all.

Win their confidence!

How should the military chaplain then win the confidence of his commander, his fellow officers and his soldiers? The decisive factor is physical presence. He must be where the men are: in the field, in the barracks, in the canteen, in the messroom. When he is where the men are, many things will grow of themselves. He will establish relations, get information and ideas, become known and respected. The time he spends in his office or in the staff-tent should be very limited. He should rather be on the move, be seen and recognised at many points in the unit.

But *how* should he be present? Among his fellow-officers and with his commander he is first of all listener and learner. He must never show off his own merits, neither

exhibit a military competence, which in any case must always be small, compared to that of his fellow officers. But he should be eager to learn what they know, not in order to become what they are but rather to understand them. The art of being a military chaplain is to apply a civilian competence to military conditions. He may in time acquire a solid military experience, but he should always remember that this experience is well used when it supports his civilian, spiritual competence. The Estonian Chief of Chaplains, LTC Tõnis Nõmmik has said: "The military chaplain should be 25-49% officer and 51-75% clergyman. Here there are borders that may never be passed." If this fact is not understood by the chaplain, if his understanding of military conditions is deficient or he is more than 49% officer, his commander should instruct him.

Questions, not statements, are the chaplain's main contribution among the officers. His willingness to learn and to understand has two aspects. First of all, it is a sign of respect. It signals that he values his fellow officers. Secondly it establishes a positive relationship. Those to whom he shows respect will also have confidence in him. Confidence creates openness, and openness is the precondition of spiritual guidance.

The sign of confidence is that he is asked for spiritual guidance. Now the questions will not come from him but from those whose souls and lives he is here to cure and heal. These questions must always get distinct and simple answers. They are mostly basic, they deal with good and evil, life, death and relationship with God. The chaplain will seldom get much time to think the matters through, which means that he should at all times be prepared. The most necessary preparation is his care for his own soul in his daily Bible reading, prayer and meditation, as well as his relation to his own spiritual guide. The

answers he gives should be lived through by himself.

Physical presence

Presence, openness, and preparedness – these factors will win the confidence of the commander and fellow officers. These factors also imply willingness to serve, loyalty to the common cause, initiative, and humour.

But how is he to win the confidence of his soldiers? The main aspect is that the confidence he wins with the officers creates respect for what he can do and what he stands for. The soldiers quickly notice when the military chaplain is treated with respect, but they will also observe when he is neglected, bullied or little valued.

The next aspect is his own presence and conduct among the men. Here the military chaplain in national service has an advantage in comparison with the situation in a professional army. In national service some of the men will have known the military chaplain before, they may even have been confirmed by him, they have at least heard his name. In any case, he is not a total stranger to them. He can be simple, respectful, and kind to them, just as he should be with his parishioners. He will soon find that they perceive him as one of them, and that they are proud to have been confirmed by him or to have relatives in his parish.

These circumstances make it easier for him to be their spiritual guide. But then he should remember that although he is himself a trained theologian and perhaps a scholar, very few of his soldiers are. Even those who are academically or scientifically trained have few words and experiences when it comes to spiritual realities. This means, that he should not concentrate on theological instruction but rather touch hearts and minds in his preaching.

Hearts and minds

But how is he to touch the hearts and minds of his soldiers? By relating the spiritual guidance to our common basic experiences. There is another word for our common basic experience: history. The Bible is history, from the creation to the end of the world. It is the story of how God transforms the old creation into the new. Wherever goodness, truth and beauty are, there God's transformation of the fallen world is at hand. Indeed, our soldiers have experienced goodness, truth, and beauty before they listened to their military chaplain, they have heard about those moments in the history of our nation and they have made such experiences themselves. There he will touch their hearts and minds.

How can the commander make use of the chaplain?

1. His presence is a symbol of the dignity of man. The soldier is more than muscles to be exploited, he has also got a soul to be cared for and a conscience to be guided.
2. He is a counsellor in spiritual and ethical matters.
3. He is there to serve the religious needs of the unit.
4. He should be able to be editor/co-editor of the unit's newsletter, an important resource against the enemy's psychological operations (psyops).
5. He is an instructor on ethical matters, e.g. international law.

In order to fulfil his task the chaplain needs:

1. Respect and support from commander and officers.
2. Ability to apply his civilian competence to military conditions.
3. Instruction on military matters.

4. Military experience.
5. The confidence of the troops.
6. Assistance, e.g. from the welfare officer or the quartermaster.
7. Reasonable physical conditions (food, sleep, rest).
8. Physical support (transport, printing, computer etc.)
9. In crisis/war: physical protection (escort).

The author holds a PhD and has served as chaplain in the Swedish Army as well as in the Estonian Army and the Finnish Navy.

Note

1. The article is based on a lecture given at the Baltic Defence College in Tarrtu, Estonia.