

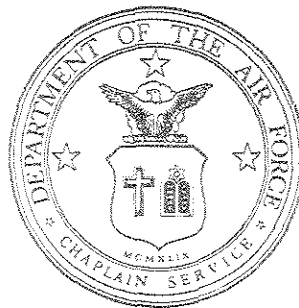
Air Force
CHAPLAINS

1971-1980

by

John E. Groh

Chaplain, Lieutenant Colonel, USAF Reserve



OFFICE, CHIEF OF AIR FORCE CHAPLAINS
WASHINGTON, D.C. 1986

conclusion was that the early religious training of the prisoners was extremely important:

To develop the virtues of patience, courage, perseverance, and hope that were so important in prison life, the POW fell back to the religious training of home and church, to the practices and hymns of early family life, and to the Christian teachings on suffering and pain.

Their third conclusion centered on the chaplain's ministry to flying personnel. "The debriefings studied," they wrote,

contained no mention of any spiritual direction or guidance given by chaplains to aircrew members. Although this establishes no ground for any inference that chaplains have been ineffective in their ministry to aircrew members (it must be remembered that the debriefings did not address this subject), it does serve as a point of challenge to chaplains to develop a program and an active ministry for the flying personnel they serve.⁵⁶

An edited version of this timely report was prepared for distribution to all senior Air Force officers and denominational endorsers late in 1975 by the office of the Chief of Chaplains, but major printing errors precluded its distribution.⁵⁷

The religious convictions of two former POWs led them to enter the ministry and the Air Force chaplaincy. After graduating from seminary in 1976, Chaplains Keith H. Lewis and Robert G. Certain were assigned respectively to Lackland and Andrews Air Force Bases. Chief of Chaplains Henry J. Meade commented that their appointments "must rank among the 'unique' events in our history. Their past role as line officers and POWs brings a special dimension that will endear them to the men and women of the Air Force." In 1976 the office of the Chief of Chaplains concurred with the Air Force Military Personnel Center's recommendation not to officially sanction a survey on chaplain ministry to flight personnel proposed by Captain Certain, then a seminary student. It was decided that while the survey questions involving SAC and Tactical Air Command (TAC) chaplains were not inimical to the Air Force chaplaincy, the negative reactions to the proposed survey by TAC operations personnel, Air University personnel, and some SAC personnel, outweighed its advantage. Chaplain Lewis, a former F-4 pilot and POW, was formally ordained into the Episcopal priest-

hood in San Antonio, Texas, in December 1976. Chaplains from Lackland AFB, where he was assigned, participated in the services.⁵⁸

A "first" occurred in 1978 when a student wearing silver leaves attended the Chaplain Orientation Course at the Air Force Chaplain School. Ch. Jerry A. Singleton was a USAF Academy graduate assigned to Southeast Asia in October 1963, and shot down and captured the next month. While imprisoned in various POW camps he had no contact with his family for almost five years. After returning to the United States in 1973, he was granted one year of excess leave to attend law school in Dallas, Texas. During that year he was led to the conviction that he was being called to the ministry. By special arrangement with the Air Force and with a promised ecclesiastical endorsement from the Southern Baptist Convention, provisions were made for him to attend seminary under funding from the Air Force Institute of Technology (AFIT). After graduation from seminary he was officially endorsed, and on June 12, 1978, Chaplain Singleton pinned on his cross and reported to Sheppard AFB for the beginning of his chaplaincy career.⁵⁹

Other ex-POWs also enriched the life and worship of Air Force chapel communities with their words and witness in the years following their return. In October 1975, Protestants at Craig AFB, Alabama, heard Col. Thomas H. Kirk, Jr., the Wing Commander, discuss his experiences as a POW. The July 1976 Protestant Prayer Breakfast at Nellis AFB, Nevada, where Ch. R. Dale Copsy was Senior Protestant Chaplain, featured Brig. Gen. Robinson Risner's account of how his faith in God sustained him during the seven years he was held prisoner. General Risner fully described his experiences in his book, *The Passing of the Night*. The book and the film made from it received wide use among Air Force chaplains.

Persons attending the Lutheran service at Eglin AFB on Confirmation Day in 1977 heard a layman tell the confirmands that "the foundation you get as you're growing up in the church is the ethical and moral basis for your dealings in the military and in every facet of your life." The confirmands, including the layman's son, and the congregation listened intently to Col. George E. (Bud) Day, legal adviser to the Judge Advocate at Eglin and the