



# Who Are the Arlington National Cemetery Chaplains?





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Every day, military chaplains serve at Arlington National Cemetery, conducting funeral services for veterans and their family members. Military chaplains represent five major faith groups (Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist) and over 100 denominations.

Because the free exercise of religion is protected by the First Amendment of the Constitution, the U.S. military employs chaplains to meet service members' spiritual needs. Chaplains are active-duty service members who are also ordained, or credentialed, by their religious organization. In times of peace, chaplains conduct religious services (including the funerals held here at Arlington) and provide spiritual counseling. In times of war, they serve as non-combatant members of military units, providing combat stress support and performing rites and rituals for the injured and dying. Each chaplain represents his or her own faith group, but also works to support all service members' right to practice, or not practice, their beliefs.

Read the following reflections from six military chaplains who served or are serving at Arlington National Cemetery. In the first section, they share stories about their time at Arlington. In the second section, they reflect on the importance of the Chaplain Corps, the role of chaplains within the military, and their own service.

*The quotes within this document are all taken from written survey responses or oral histories with the following six chaplains who served at Arlington National Cemetery sometime between 2020 and 2023. Two chaplains requested to remain anonymous. Quotes have been edited for length and clarity.*

*The opinions expressed in this document are the personal views of the six chaplains noted below and not representative of official Army or Arlington National Cemetery views.*



**Chaplain (Maj.)  
Menachem Stern**

Time served at ANC: 2 years  
Funerals conducted: 65-70  
Service Branch: Army  
Religious Denomination: Jewish



**Chaplain (Capt.)  
Joseph Mason**

Time served at ANC: 2 years  
Funerals conducted: 493  
Service Branch: Army  
Religious Denomination: Christian



**Chaplain (Lt. Col.) Dan Kersey,  
Senior Army Chaplain**

Time served at ANC: 3 months  
Funerals conducted: about 15  
Service Branch: Army  
Religious Denomination: Christian



**Chaplain (Capt.) Ben Skelton**

Time served at ANC: 2 years  
Funerals conducted: 400+  
Service Branch: Air Force  
Religious Denomination: Christian



**Anonymous Chaplain**

Time served at ANC: 3 months  
Funerals conducted: 37  
Service Branch: Army  
Religious Denomination: Christian



**Anonymous Chaplain**

Time served at ANC: 3 months  
Funerals conducted: 100+  
Service Branch: Army  
Religious Denomination: Christian



## What were your first impressions of Arlington?

“The history and beauty of the place, and the honor of being able to minister to families in such a sacred time of grief at once made me so very proud and so humbled. It’s an odd combination of emotions, but they somehow harmonize with a privilege like this one. ‘Why do I get to do this?’ and ‘Man, I’m so glad I get to do this’ at the same time.”

— Chaplain Dan Kersey

*Sunrise in Section 25, October 25, 2018. (ANC/Elizabeth Fraser)*

“This is a breathtakingly beautiful place!”

— Chaplain Ben Skelton

“Nothing could have prepared me for driving through the gates the first time. I have chills right now [thinking about it.] Driving through the gate the first time — it took my breath away; I felt like I’m on hallowed ground. This feeling repeats every time I drive in, every day even now.

“This is the place where there’s a common denominator among everyone on these grounds. [Everyone here has] either themselves served or someone that is near and dear to them served our country selflessly. They gave of their best years in service of our country. It’s something that cannot be said about too many other cemeteries around the world. Everyone buried here is connected to each other and to our Nation by service to our country.

“When I get to speak about Arlington to people that are not from here, I highlight how fleeting life is, how life is fragile and could go in a moment. But on the other hand, you realize how monumental the people that I buried are, and how humbling it is for me, who am I that I got to say the last words for them here on Earth.”

— Chaplain Menachem Stern



## How does serving at Arlington differ from serving elsewhere in the military?

“At other bases, the chaplain always works in a supporting role of the mission. Here at Arlington, the mission does not happen until the chaplain shows up.”

— Chaplain Ben Skelton

“ANC differs from other places in the military in that you work with the public most days, and with civilians every day. I have worked in historic locations before (Wheeler Army Airfield, HI) but this stands out because you never know who you are going to encounter when you are outside your office.

“Also, when I leave work out of the front gate, I see the Lincoln Memorial and Washington Monument, right in front of me. I can’t not see these American icons.”

— Anonymous Chaplain



“I’ve been all over doing services, counseling, memorials, funerals, bar mitzvahs, bat mitzvahs, weddings, circumcisions, etc. Normally, chaplains meet the mission requirements by doing the funerals [at Arlington]; occasionally they’ll preach on the weekends to support the [local] garrisons — Belvoir, Meyer, Meade, etc. As the only rabbi on active duty in the National Capital Region, I did a service or two [outside of Arlington] every single weekend.”

— Chaplain Menachem Stern

“The laser focus of the mission. Here, the Arlington Army Chaplains office has one singular focus: the professional and compassionate execution of interment services. We may on occasion get to provide pastoral counseling to family members, soldiers, or Department of Defense (DoD) civilians, but our purpose is to ensure we honor the fallen with the services we conduct here. Elsewhere, your assigned and implied duties may take you to any number of places and unique ministry opportunities.

“Here, the mission is simple, but not easy. There are no other priorities which compete with the mission, but that mission demands complete focus and exacting excellence. And demands it repeatedly. That attention to detail is our ministry to provide the right honors to the fallen and their families in the way they’ve earned.”

— Chaplain Dan Kersey



## Are there any funerals that stand out?

“General Thomas S. Moorman – he was the forerunner that laid the groundwork for the Space Force. The Chief of Space Operations, General John W. “Jay” Raymond, presented the flag to the next of kin, and the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General John E. Hyten, was the keynote speaker.

“There were over 30 distinguished visitors in the audience (former secretary of the Air Force, former director of National Reconnaissance Office, former under-secretary of defense, etc.). As a captain and especially as a chaplain, you typically don’t work and interact with this level of leadership.”

– Chaplain Ben Skelton



“The Pattillo brothers (Cuthbert Augustus “Bill” and Charles C. “Buck”) – Being a part of the first ever double general officer funeral (with their wives) was amazing. These men started the Air Force Thunderbird program and had absolutely amazing careers. I was so honored to be a part of it.”

– Chaplain Ben Skelton

“We have over 250,000 veterans, over 400,000 people in Arlington, and they’re all notable in some way or the other.”

– Chaplain Joseph Mason

“I had the opportunity to prepare the remarks for the burial of the Honorable Ruth Bader Ginsburg. While I didn’t conduct the funeral itself, I had the honor to support it by preparing the remarks — the actual words that were said at the funeral, at the graveside.

“Each service is unique, honorable, and special. I had the honor to officiate the services for a WWII Veteran who received 2 Silver Stars, 2 Purple Hearts, and an Article 15; all for his heroism during the war. The stories of these veterans, their families, and the impact they left on this world will stay with me forever. I keep a spreadsheet of the stories of each funeral I conduct, this way I can tell the stories and keep their memories alive.”

– Chaplain Menachem Stern

“I did a funeral a couple of weeks ago for a Vietnam veteran who had a Silver Star and two Purple Hearts. The stories of the courage of those who’ve served are always amazing and make me acutely conscious of the need to honor them well.”

– Chaplain Dan Kersey

*The “Thunderbirds” perform a double missing man flyover as part of the funeral service for U.S. Air Force Maj. Gen. Cuthbert Pattillo and Lt. Gen. Charles Pattillo, Sept. 14, 2022. (ANC/Elizabeth Fraser)*



## Can you share a story of joy from working at Arlington? A story of difficulty?

"I had a family that was unable to attend a service. I wanted to make sure they were able to still participate in some way. Before the service I handed my phone to the cemetery representative to record the service and I sent the video to the family. It meant the world to them and helped them find closure and healing."

– Chaplain Ben Skelton

*A U.S. Navy Chaplain offers condolences to Donelle Knudsen at the conclusion of military funeral honors for her uncle, Seaman 1<sup>st</sup> Class James C. Williams, September 9, 2021. (ANC/Elizabeth Fraser)*



"During the new employee training, an ANC historian said, 'every gravestone has a story,' and I realized what a privilege it was for families to share the stories of their loved ones with me. Something always catches me about the person's story, and I have decided to keep a service journal of sorts with a couple sentences about every person whose service I conduct."

"I have also conducted [funerals for] two veteran suicides so those were more emotional and more challenging. One was a veteran and a police officer, whose widow told me the local police department he worked for did not give him police honors at his memorial service, which was very painful for her."

– Anonymous Chaplain

"One of the most difficult services was for a veteran that died by suicide. It was so heartbreaking to see the flag presented to her husband with their four small children sitting next to him."

– Chaplain Ben Skelton

"The joy comes in strange ways. It's when a family member thanks you for honoring their loved one in such a meaningful way. So maybe 'joy' isn't the right word. It's a deep and solemn sense of satisfaction and the encouragement that what you do makes a difference for people."

"The difficulty comes from seeing people grieve daily. I think particularly of when there are young children who've lost a parent. The heartache that they experience, that you can see written on their faces, is hard to process."

– Chaplain Dan Kersey



*U.S. Army Capt. Michael Tovo hands the U.S. flag to Felicia Ross during the funeral of her husband, U.S. Army Capt. Andrew Ross, Jan. 8, 2019. (ANC, Elizabeth Fraser)*



## What has surprised you most in this role?

"Because I hear so many stories about people, it really helps me reprioritize my life. Many people that I've done services for have had very successful careers in the military and beyond; however, that is not what their family always want to talk about.

"Major General M. (Milton) Peterson's son recalled that his dad would put shaving cream on his face, and before shaving, he would chase his kids around the house trying to give them a kiss.

"General Charles G. Boyd was a Vietnam POW. When his son spoke about his dad, he recalled the kindness that he showed everyone.

"To illustrate this, he spoke about when his dad was stationed at Maxwell Air Force Base and was in charge of Air University. There was a prison on base, and the prisoners did the landscaping — of which two were assigned to his house. The day that General Boyd left Maxwell to become the Deputy Commander of the U.S. Air Force in Europe, his son remembers his dad in the driveway hugging these two gardeners — both prisoners — and weeping because he would miss them. As a 16-year-old, it left a profound impact on the son to see his father show such kindness, compassion, and humanity to people that were overlooked and marginalized by society."

– Chaplain Ben Skelton

"I am most surprised by how every person buried here has something about them that catches my attention. For example, I buried a woman who, while an Army spouse in the early 1960s, joined in civil rights protests in Greensboro, NC, following the lunch counter sit-ins, to help her children have a better country to live in."

"The volume of services that ANC conducts every day."

– Chaplain Dan Kersey

– Anonymous Chaplain



*Chap. (Maj.) Luis Kruger, deputy chaplain for memorial affairs, presides over the graveside service for U.S. Army 1st Lt. Weston C. Lee, May 25, 2017. (ANC/Elizabeth Fraser)*



## How do you balance family [of the person being interred] expectations with Army regulations? With your denomination's teachings? Is there ever conflict?

"The most difficult hurdle to overcome at Arlington is the limitation of time – there is never enough it seems. From the first communication I try to manage this expectation that my time with the family will be short, however, I strive to make it as meaningful as possible. It is also difficult to summarize 100 years of life in just minutes."

– Chaplain Ben Skelton

"I find no conflict with Army regulations. From my denomination I am encouraged to live by grace. While my denominational resources provide me with many options for a funeral service, I am not bound to follow them – I do what seems right in order to follow the love ethic (love my neighbor as myself).

"I conducted a service for a Unitarian using resources I found on the Unitarian Universalist Association website. For a family who had a Jewish daughter and son-in-law, I used a Jewish prayer and blessing so they would feel included in their loved one's service."

– Anonymous Chaplain

"I haven't seen much conflict so far. I think what helps in conversations where a conflict might occur is to attempt to frame for the family exactly what Arlington does. I would encourage families who want a prolonged religious service to seek out a family minister in their house of worship or funeral home. What we do here certainly does and should have an undeniable religious component, but it is really more akin to the graveside committal service I would perform after a funeral service in the church. Just with the added elements of military honors."

– Chaplain Dan Kersey



*A U.S. Army Chaplain provides remarks during the funeral of U.S. Army Command Sgt. Maj. Bennie Adkins on December 16, 2020. (ANC/Elizabeth Fraser)*



## How do you balance family [of the person being interred] expectations with Army regulations? With your denomination's teachings? Is there ever conflict?

"Judaism requires immediate burial, or as soon as possible after a person passes away. [As the only Active Duty Jewish chaplain at Arlington,] people kept calling me regardless of what service they were part of — Army, Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard, Marines — people would call me at all hours of the day when their loved one passed away to see what I could do to expedite the process [of burial at Arlington].

"[I often had to tell them that if they wanted a quicker burial,] they had to go elsewhere — Quantico, Fort Sam, Houston, some other Veterans Affairs or military cemetery. The wait at Arlington could not be influenced by a religious need. There's nothing I could do about it.

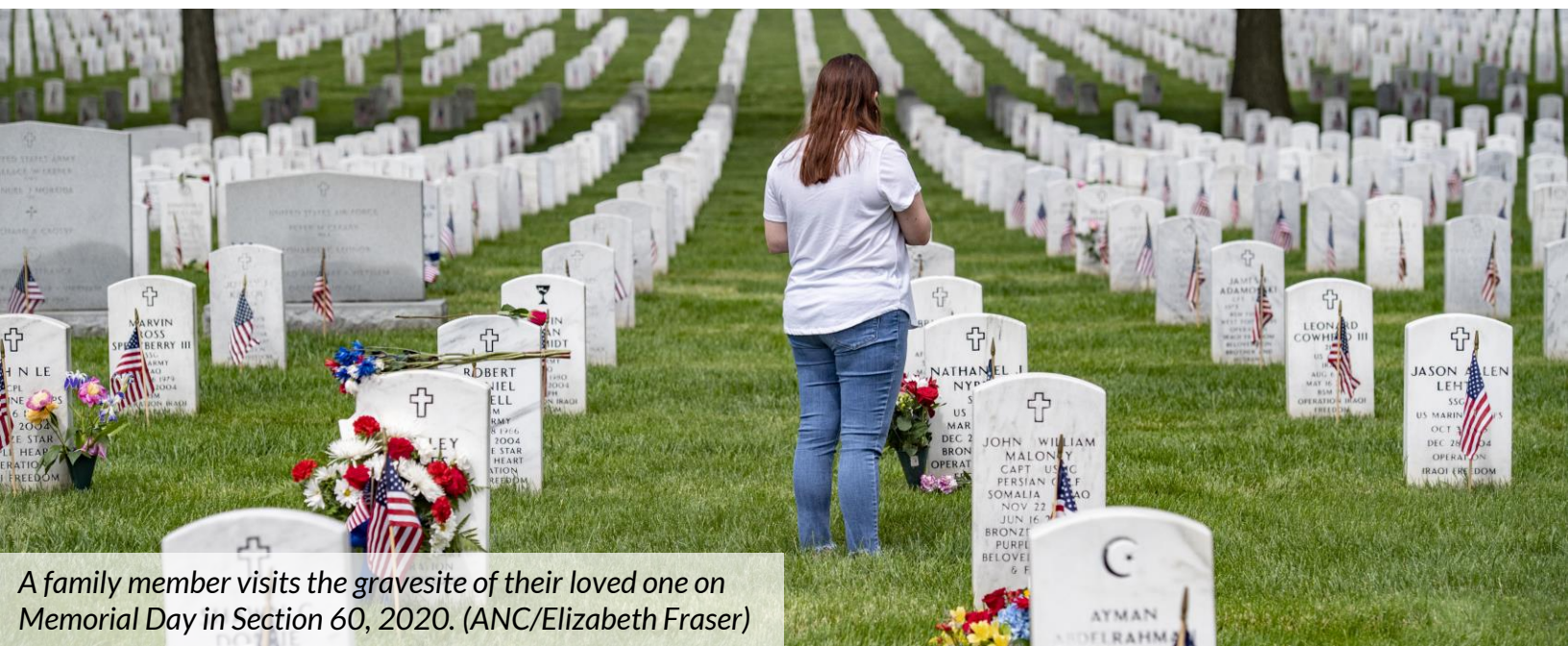
"I can't go change what the regulations are. Even if I could visit leadership each time someone asked for a quicker burial, which I've done countless times, in every time that I raised it, each time I was reminded again, there is no way to expedite the timelines, 'We'll deal with the requests in the right time and so on.' It's difficult to tell that to a child that's grieving and cannot get closure.

"A handful of people agreed to burial elsewhere, which is how I got to do funerals at Quantico and some other places. The families agreed to go there if they got a military chaplain or if they got full honors. I did my best to support them."

– Chaplain Menachem Stern

"When I read the Bible, it says to 'weep with those who weep.' Grief is a complex thing that effects everyone differently. I just try to meet each person where they are on the journey and provide them the comfort that God Himself would. I try to remind the families that tears are appropriate... It helps to normalize the emotions. I then remind them in the service that one day God 'will wipe away every tear from our eyes. There will be no more death, no more sorrow, no more pain for the former things have passed away' and that this scripture is a beautiful reminder that there is no pain on earth that God in heaven cannot heal. People need hope when they are hurting. It is a privilege to offer that in there most despite time of need."

– Chaplain Ben Skelton



A family member visits the gravesite of their loved one on Memorial Day in Section 60, 2020. (ANC/Elizabeth Fraser)



## What are you going to miss the most when you leave Arlington?

"The job. There is nothing else like this in the Air Force. People who leave here miss the work because it is so rewarding and fulfilling. You can't recreate this anywhere else."

– Chaplain Ben Skelton

"I'm going to miss the fact that I'm able to do a defined mission of giving people closure and being a comfort to them. My peers and fellow soldiers came out to do the last funeral walk with me — the walk to the funeral and the walk from the funeral back to the office. And in those moments, I reflected, I'm going to miss them."

"I'm also going to miss that I had the opportunity from here to help many people that are not here — soldiers and so on, that were calling me about Jewish matters in general. I'm able to do more from this seat because I'm not out in the field or I'm not deploying with a unit. And I'm going to miss that. [At Arlington, I could offer] the direct support to people [and] the strategic support to the Army — the balance of the two, that's what I'm going to miss."

– Chaplain Menachem Stern

"The stories of those who served, and hearing family members retell stories about their loved ones. Being a part of connecting families to a part of their loved one's life that happened decades earlier. Being able to interact with grandchildren and talk to them — even if they're my age. [Perhaps] their grandfather served in World War II and they never saw him wear his uniform or never heard very many of the stories. [It is an honor] to be a part of them seeing this military honor service, this tribute to their loved one's service. Maybe they only knew him as an old man. But they can see why he was just like these soldiers here, and it gives them a deeper perspective or appreciation of the sacrifice that [their grandfather] made when they were a much younger person."

"So many things. Everything I've said above about the significance of the ministry and the mission, the solemn honor of the place. And then the views. It's amazing how beautiful this cemetery is, with the skyline of DC across the hill, the proximity of the monuments and the history of the place."

– Chaplain Dan Kersey

*Chaplain Stern shares remarks during a funeral, circa 2021. (Stern's personal collection)*



"Being here allowed me to get a bigger understanding of another side of our mission, to see that life is complex. You can have a chapel full honor service for a colonel and two people show up, or you can have a 150-person service for an enlisted service member. There is so much more to life than just our military rank. The things that we did in the service — which while we're doing it, is so important to us — but if that's all we have, then then we've missed the mark. If we've overlooked our families and the influence we have on our kids, in order to gain rank or position, then, then we've missed something. This has helped me see that in a clear manner."

– Chaplain Joseph Mason



## How would you describe what you do?

“Chaplains’ constitutional responsibility is to ensure all soldiers can freely practice their religion. We also care for soldiers and families, accompany them and ensure they have someone to talk to, and to provide services, sacraments, etc.”

– Anonymous Chaplain

“I see myself as a face of grace, especially for those who may have no one else, and to advise leadership.”

– Anonymous Chaplain

“I’m here to provide the services, the religious services for the Jewish troops. But that’s not exclusively for the Jewish troops. In other words, anyone could attend my services and I also provide counseling and other support to any soldier, regardless of their faith.”

– Chaplain Menachem Stern

“It’s our job to take care of people. We exist to meet them in the darkest places of their lives and bring light. We represent the eternal, the divine, and the transcendent in the most agonizing moments people face, and through that we help to bring hope.”

– Chaplain Dan Kersey

“As a chaplain, one needs to remember that you must use your position to impact and positively affect every single soldier in your charge; this is your opportunity to serve as the moral compass of ethics, morality, faith, and religion for the troops, regardless of what religion they follow.”

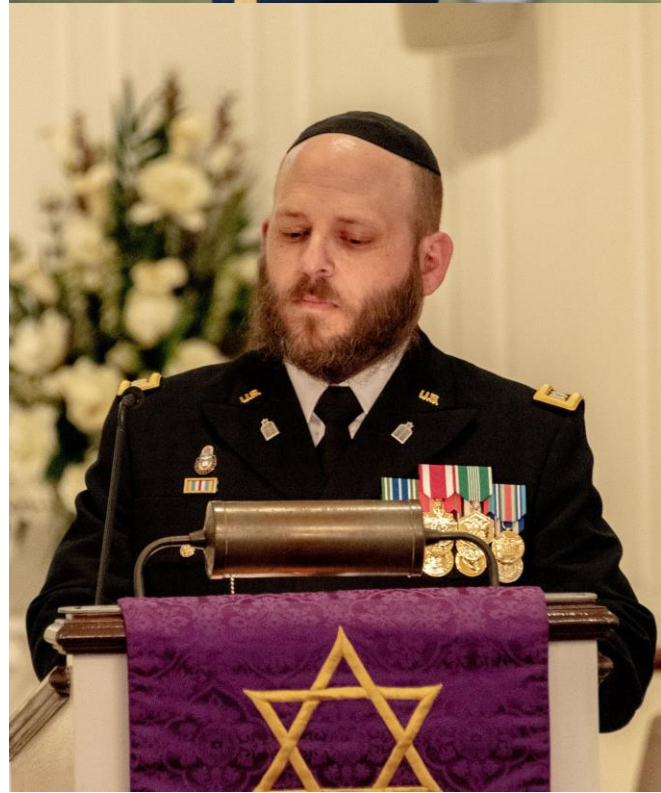
– Chaplain Menachem Stern

“I serve those who serve.”

– Anonymous Chaplain

*Top: U.S. Army Chaplain Lt. Col. Grace Hollis performs a graveside service, April 4, 2016. (ANC/Rachel Larue)*

*Bottom: Chaplain Stern conducts a Jewish service, undated. (Stern’s personal collection)*





## Is it difficult being a chaplain?

“There are difficult days for sure, but the good days far outnumber the difficult ones.”

– Chaplain Ben Skelton

“At times, absolutely. But it is also a great joy. You have the honor of walking with people in the most sacred and personal moments of their lives. Births, weddings, deaths, loss, grief, joy, etc. You’re there for it all. You get to celebrate with those who rejoice and mourn with those who grieve.

“There is nothing more agonizing than standing beside the casualty notification officer telling (in every one of my cases) a young wife and mother that her husband isn’t coming home. That can haunt you. And sometimes you are entrusted with people’s darkest and most painful secrets and regrets. That can be a heavy load to carry.”

– Chaplain Dan Kersey

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## What called you to this work?

“The scripture in Isaiah is a beautiful one to reflect on: ‘Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?”’ And I said, ‘Here am I. Send me!’”

– Chaplain Ben Skelton

“I have a two-part calling story which led to becoming an Army chaplain. I was first called to be a pastor while attending a chapel service in college where a seminary recruiter preached, which got an inner stirring going inside me. After spending my next couple years testing that stirring and wrestling with God, I decided God was calling me to be a pastor. I was ordained in 1996 and served congregations for nearly 15 years.

“After the 2009 Ft. Hood shootings, I experienced another ‘stirring up,’ and after talking with friends in the military, a couple chaplains, and lots of praying, there I was in 2011 at Chaplain Basic Officer Leadership Course at Ft. Jackson. At age 40.”

– Anonymous Chaplain

“My dad’s side of the family has a long military history. Dad is a retired Marine and Vietnam vet. My uncle is a former tanker in the Army. My grandfather was a waist gunner on a bomber in the Pacific in WWII. On my mom’s side of the family, most everyone is in ministry in some capacity. There’s a neat confluence of that in what I do that ‘fits.’

“More immediately, though, it was post 9/11 and I was in seminary. I thought I’d go do my part for a couple of years and then get out. Turns out I loved it and here I am, still going some 17 years later.”

– Chaplain Dan Kersey

“When I heard that the Army was looking for rabbis, my first reaction was, why do they need rabbis? But I agreed to attend the recruiting open house. A couple of Jewish chaplains and a Jewish soldier were presenting, and halfway through that presentation, I texted my wife. I said, ‘I think I found my calling.’”

– Chaplain Menachem Stern



## How have service members received you? Are they generally receptive? How do you handle situations where they are not receptive?

“Not everyone knows what to do with chaplains. Many service members had a bad experience with church or religion, or they never stepped foot in a church. I try to connect with people from a personal level. Yes, I am a pastor and chaplain, but I’m also a person too. I have hobbies (classic cars, football, etc.). This approach seems to help build bridges that lead to trust and openness.”

– Chaplain Ben Skelton

“Service members generally are receptive to chaplains if they don’t sense you are there to convert them or judge them. You need to accept them for who they are.”

– Anonymous Chaplain

“I am not here to convert people or force people to talk with me. I am here to be a ‘face of grace’ so if they don’t want to have anything to do with me, I simply treat them as the beloved child of God I believe they are.”

– Anonymous Chaplain

“Generally, I think that most service members appreciate the chaplain even if they don’t believe the same as I do. Some think of us as good luck charms or whatever. Some are admittedly resistant to chaplains, but you can’t take that personally. I’ve generally been pretty good at winning soldiers over in time. If you can demonstrate your competence and your commitment to them, they’ll warm to you.

“But you also must respect the fact that some might never do that. You must respect their wishes and care for them as best you can regardless. Maybe they’ve been hurt by a minister or chaplain previously, so you can’t force yourself into that situation. You just need to gently and patiently be available to them until they invite you in. Sometimes that takes a long time. And sometimes it might not happen at all.”

– Chaplain Dan Kersey

“At each duty station, deployment, or temporary duty where I met Jewish Soldiers, I was received with great excitement, similar to a thirsty person who is given water to drink. Even Soldiers in general, non-religious, would be warm to me, I had several experiences where a Soldier requested to counsel with me specifically, even though they were not Jewish, as they sought the chaplain guidance without prejudice, with confidentiality and care.”

– Chaplain Menachem Stern

*U.S. Navy Chaplain (Cmdr.) Michael D. Williams conducts a religious service for Marines, Sailors, and Soldiers in Afghanistan, April 5, 2013. (U.S. Marine Corps/Cpl. Alejandro Pena)*





## What was involved in your chaplain training? Do you think it prepared you to serve as a chaplain?

"I have six degrees, but they are not what I hang on the walls of my office. While they did a great job of preparing me to be a chaplain, they are not what helps me minister to people. The scars of life – pain, death, divorce – are much greater teachers than anything you could learn in a classroom. It is what people can relate to and what makes people open up. When you can empathize with their pain you can give them the hope that you have from your faith."

– Chaplain Ben Skelton

"Both my four years of seminary to be ordained as a pastor and my chaplain basic course helped prepare me in many ways. They didn't prepare me in many other ways, but trained me to seek to learn and grow. My numerous years as a civilian pastor also served me very well because as a civilian pastor you have to learn how to build consensus, which is something you need as a military chaplain since we do not have command authority. That experience meant I knew how to conduct basic pastor things like preach and provide pastoral care, which enabled me to focus on learning being an Army staff officer."

– Anonymous Chaplain



*U.S. Army Chaplain Assistant (Spc.) Annette Daniel (right) catches up with soldiers on Forward Operating Base Shank, Afghanistan, April 13, 2012. (U.S. Army/Capt. Katherine Williams)*

"Chaplains are one of the three 'professional' branches of the military, along with JAG [Judge Advocate General, or the military's legal corps] and physicians. As such, we are required to have an advanced degree (a Master of Divinity or equivalent) before we can even enter service. Additionally, we must have two years of ministry experience after the conclusion of that degree, be ordained by a recognized ecclesiastical body, and be endorsed by that body as a chaplain to even be boarded for service. So, it's a lengthy process."

"Upon endorsement as selection, we then attend the Chaplain Basic Officer Leader Course at the Chaplain School at Fort Jackson. And after all that, I would still say that, no, you're not initially prepared. That all gets you the basic framework for the real learning that takes place on the job. It gets you the familiarization with the culture of the military in which you will still need to learn how to function. Most other branches have the [service] academies or ROTC or similar processes for preparation. We do not. It's often a learn-as-you-go process."

– Chaplain Dan Kersey



## What role do chaplains play in helping service members live out their faiths day-to-day?

“It depends on the circumstances and their beliefs. In the field, I have often offered brief field services when convenient. In some training environments, field services are not practical, so I have printed out small devotions for the day and handed them out to interested persons. I have helped soldiers with dietary restrictions to request meals in accordance with their faith tradition. I have assisted Norse Pagan soldiers’ requests to wear a beard.

“I am willing to meet with all soldiers regardless of their religious beliefs or sexual identities, the latter of which is not something all chaplains are able to do. Some chaplains will not conduct relationship counseling or conduct a marriage training event with a same sex couple, which for some chaplains is required by their endorser (recognized ecclesiastical agency) and for others by their personal beliefs.”

– Anonymous Chaplain



## What is an endorser?

All chaplains must be endorsed, or approved, by their recognized ecclesiastical agency to serve in the military. Broadly speaking, the endorsement has a two-fold effect. First, it ensures the chaplain is practicing and teaching their faith in a manner consistent with the theological convictions of the agency/church/synagogue/denomination that vouched for them.

Secondly, it protects the chaplain from being compelled to violate their theological convictions. For example, some chaplains come from faith traditions which view, say, baptism as something reserved for believers who are both old enough and educated in their faith enough to determine for themselves that they want to be baptized. Other denominations take a different view of baptism and baptize infants into the church. If a chaplain from the first group is approached by a soldier who wants him/her to baptize their baby, he is not compelled to do so. He is, however, responsible to ensure that soldier is connected with a chaplain or minister who can meet that request. If a chaplain was being compelled to act in a manner which violated their religious convictions or the stated theological perspectives of their endorser, that endorsing agent could pull the endorsement as a means of protecting the chaplain. Endorsers are important and influential members of the whole dynamic of the chaplaincy.



## What role do chaplains play in helping service members live out their faiths day-to-day?

“Chaplains have a responsibility to provide for the religious needs of their soldiers. They do that by either performing religious rites, ceremonies, and practices directly for those of faith traditions close enough to their own for that to be appropriate; or they provide access to the necessary resources to ensure that the religious need is met. That might mean coordinating with another chaplain or civilian clergy member or ensuring that someone has the resources or provisions they need to meet that need.”

– Chaplain Dan Kersey

“Our role is to be with the soldiers wherever they are at, to find opportunities to ‘preach’ the Gospel by giving them a good example.”

– Anonymous Chaplain

“Freedom of religion is one of the most precious rights Americans have. That freedom was foundational in our formation as a nation, and we must therefore staunchly defend that freedom. Soldiers have the right to the free practice of their religious faith as much as any citizen. They don’t surrender that when they enter the service. But in an organization such as the Army that is pluralistic, soldiers may on occasion face resistance to their beliefs from others who do not understand or value them.

“I see my role as the voice who defends the rights of soldiers, family members, and authorized civilians to practice (or abstain from practicing) their faith tradition in a manner consistent with their beliefs. Usually that simply involves explaining to others the commitment the Army has to free exercise. On rare occasions that may involve arguing in their behalf.”

– Chaplain Dan Kersey

*U.S. Army Chaplain Raymond Akeriwe conducts a Catholic field service at Fort Hood, Texas, September 28, 2018. (U.S. Army/Capt. Scott Kuhn)*





## Why do you think it is important for the military to have chaplains?

“The freedom of religion is a foundational right for Americans. Without chaplains in uniform, side by side with their soldiers, enduring the same things they are enduring, who would be there to ensure their free exercise rights? If we are going to send America’s sons and daughters into combat, where unfortunately some will certainly perish, then we must provide them with the opportunity to be right with God before they go.

“Additionally, chaplains provide a safe and confidential place for soldiers to unburden their souls or consciences. It doesn’t matter what someone tells me, it stays between me and them. That’s crucial for soldiers, family members, and others to be able to get help knowing they’re safe to talk about anything and everything they might be dealing with.”

– Chaplain Dan Kersey

U.S. Army Chaplain (Maj.) Christian Bang (left) checks in on a soldier during training at Fort Hood, Texas, September 27, 2018. (U.S. Army/Sgt. Jessica DuVernay)



“Chaplains serve as the guardians of the Free Exercise Clause [of the First Amendment].”

– Anonymous Chaplain

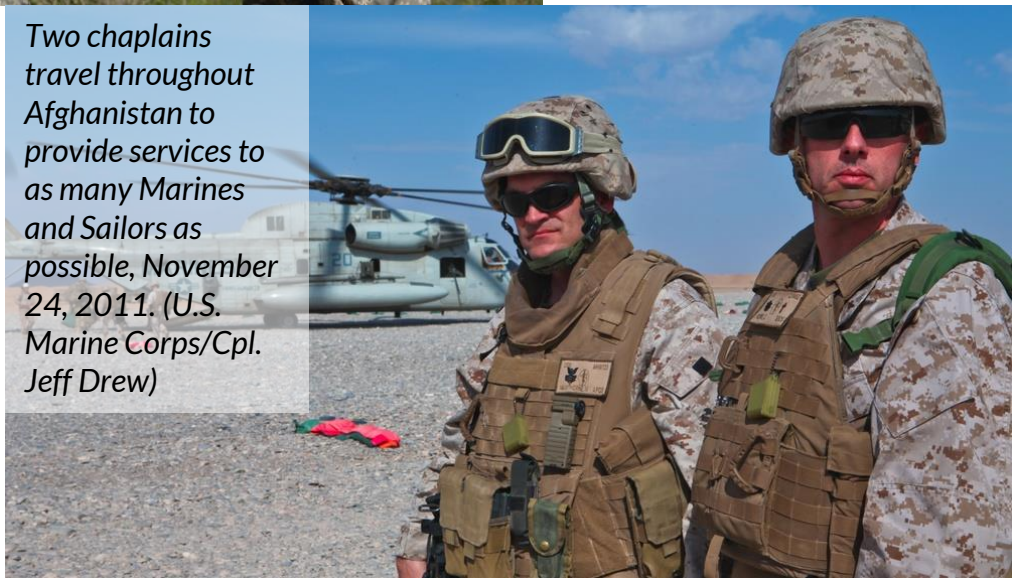
“Military chaplains are uniquely qualified to serve our Troops. A military Chaplain is embedded with the troops – we walk the walk, talk the talk, and share experiences with our Soldiers, something that civilian clergy cannot do.”

– Chaplain Menachem Stern

“We bring to the table a crucial aspect of everyone’s life, the opportunity to worship and to sustain the soldier’s soul. General George Marshall said it best: ‘The soldier’s heart, the soldier’s spirit, the soldier’s soul, are everything. Unless the soldier’s soul sustains him, he cannot be relied on and will fail himself and his commander and his country in the end.’”

– Anonymous Chaplain

Two chaplains travel throughout Afghanistan to provide services to as many Marines and Sailors as possible, November 24, 2011. (U.S. Marine Corps/Cpl. Jeff Drew)





**The military historically and today has a majority Christian population. As a chaplain, what is it like to work within an institution that has a Christian majority yet still includes people of diverse religious faiths, or no faith at all? What is challenging or rewarding about such an experience, and how do you minister to diverse service members? Have you heard any stories from non-Christian service members who encountered religious challenges in the military?**

“The military population is a microcosm of the population at large. If the military historically had a majority Christian population, it’s because the U.S. has also had that majority. The challenge with that is meeting the diverse needs of low-density faith traditions, some of which are very small indeed. It requires chaplains to be constantly learning as they encounter faith practices that they might not be familiar with, and to learn how best to meet those needs.

“I’ve heard several stories from non-Christian service members who have encountered religious challenges in the military – mostly out of ignorance and seldom out of actual animosity. I’ve also heard many stories of Christian service members who have likewise encountered similar challenges. The goal in all those instances is the same: protect the free-practice rights of every soldier, whether they share your own faith tradition or not.”

– Chaplain Dan Kersey

“I find it rewarding to work with people of all sorts of beliefs, and view caring for those who are coming from a minority belief background as a spiritual matter of Christian hospitality.”

– Anonymous Chaplain



*A group of chaplains and chaplain assistants join a preliminary mission briefing, August 12, 2011. (U.S. Army Reserve/SpC. True Thao)*



## How has serving as a military chaplain affected your views on religion and spirituality?

"It has challenged my own beliefs, but ultimately reinforced and strengthened them even as I learn and grow from other Christian and non-Christian faith traditions I encounter."

– Chaplain Dan Kersey

"It has made me value my own tradition that much more, and the need for me spiritually to keep connection to my own tradition, which then empowers me to serve others."

– Anonymous Chaplain

"With only very rare exceptions, chaplains at all levels work with other chaplains – usually from a wide range of faith traditions. I have learned so much from them. While never wavering on my own beliefs and convictions, I have seen the theological richness and beauty of other Christian traditions. I've further grown in my understanding of how people of altogether different faith traditions see the world and what they value. These differing perspectives have challenged me and caused me to reflect more deeply on what I believe and why I believe it. In the end, it has strengthened my own faith and made me more appreciative of others, even when we don't necessarily agree."

– Chaplain Dan Kersey

*Section 60, April 29, 2020. (ANC/Elizabeth Fraser)*





## Service members talk to you. Who do you talk to?

"That's easy. Other chaplains, my pastor, my wife, my family, my mentor. Never in a way that violates confidentiality. I have no shortage of people to get counsel and care from."

– Chaplain Dan Kersey

"My spouse is my greatest support, followed by attending a church of my own tradition whenever possible..... In attending a civilian church, I receive spiritual replenishment from elements in worship such as the Sacrament of Holy Communion, familiar music/liturgy, and a message in line with my theological tradition. I also view the pastor as someone to talk to, and who can talk to me because I know the loneliness of pastoral ministry. By participating in a local church, I also help bridge the unhelpful civil-military gap that continues to grow in our country."

– Anonymous Chaplain

"Peers. If I have a chaplain that's at the same place that I am, I find it pretty good to be able to vent to each other about things, to be able to talk to somebody. If I don't have a chaplain that's nearby, I just don't do it. Even the people of the same rank as me within a battalion, there's not a whole lot that I want to talk to them about, about the stresses that I'm feeling."

"My position within the unit, I would say, is similar to the leadership of a battalion, whether the commander or the sergeant major. There's not a lot of people they can talk to about the stresses that they're going through. But I find having a peer that I trust is very helpful just to even if it's not the deep stuff to be able to talk to, but to have somebody to be able to chat with us is helpful."

– Chaplain Joseph Mason

"The sages teach, 'make for yourself a mentor, and acquire a friend.' I speak with my mentors every week and with my friends on occasion. In order for the mentor to be effective, they must be neutral (not directly in your chain of command), knowledgeable, and focused. I have a spiritual mentor and a military mentor. One is to keep me on the right path spiritually, while the other is to guide me in my military career."

– Chaplain Menachem Stern

*A blue jay sits on a headstone in Section 60, June 24, 2019. (ANC/Elizabeth Fraser)*





## PHOTOS:

**Page 1:** Sean K. Harp, funeral for retired Air Force Gen. David C. Jones, October 25, 2013, Arlington National Cemetery, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/arlingtonnatl/17456954549/>.

**Page 1:** Elizabeth Fraser, Section 60, July 24, 2017, Arlington National Cemetery, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/arlingtonnatl/47761116342>.

**Page 3:** Elizabeth Fraser, Sunrise at Arlington National Cemetery, October 25, 2018, Arlington National Cemetery, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/arlingtonnatl/30613488417/>.

**Page 4:** Elizabeth Fraser, A Special Military Funeral is Held for the Late Gen. (ret.) Colin Powell at Arlington National Cemetery, Nov. 5, 2021, Arlington National Cemetery, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/arlingtonnatl/51657483211/>.

**Page 5:** Elizabeth Fraser, Military Funeral Honors with Funeral Escort were Conducted for Twin Brothers U.S. Air Force Maj. Gen. Cuthbert Pattillo and Lt. Gen. Charles Pattillo in Section 75, September 14, 2022, Arlington National Cemetery, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/arlingtonnatl/52357962748/>.

**Page 6:** Elizabeth Fraser, Military Funeral Honors Are Conducted For U.S. Navy Seaman 1st Class James C. Williams in Section 33, September 9, 2021, Arlington National Cemetery, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/arlingtonnatl/51442760081/>.

**Page 6:** Elizabeth Fraser, Military Funeral Honors with Funeral Escort for U.S. Army Capt. Andrew Ross in Section 60, January 8, 2019, Arlington National Cemetery, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/arlingtonnatl/46666786111/>.

**Page 7:** Elizabeth Fraser, Graveside service for U.S. Army 1st Lt. Weston C. Lee in Arlington National Cemetery, May 25, 2017, Arlington National Cemetery, <https://flickr.com/photos/arlingtonnatl/34911053965/>.

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**Page 9:** Elizabeth Fraser, Memorial Day 2020, May 25, 2020, Arlington National Cemetery, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/arlingtonnatl/49935641786/>.

**Page 10:** Chaplain Stern shares remarks during a funeral, circa 2021, Menachem Stern Personal Collection.

**Page 11:** Rachel Larue, Graveside service for U.S. Army Sgt. Wilson Meckley Jr. in Arlington National Cemetery, April 4, 2016, U.S. Army, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/arlingtonnatl/25965415110/>.

**Page 11:** Chaplain Stern conducts a Jewish service, undated, Menachem Stern Personal Collection.

**Page 13:** Alejandro Pena, U.S. Navy chaplain provides religious services on FOB Payne [image 11 of 15], April 5, 2013, U.S. Marine Corps, <https://www.dvidshub.net/image/903210/us-navy-chaplain-provides-religious-services-fob-payne>.

**Page 14:** Katharine Williams, Making a difference one soldier at a time [image 2 of 2], April 13, 2012, U.S. Army, <https://www.dvidshub.net/image/566512/making-difference-one-soldier-time>.



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**Page 15:** Kyle Niemi, Coast Guard chaplain provides religious services during response to Hurricane Maria [image 5 of 5], October 8, 2017, U.S. Coast Guard, <https://www.dvidshub.net/image/3847538/coast-guard-chaplain-provides-religious-services-during-response-hurricane-maria>.

**Page 15:** Sadie Colbert, Learning to lean on the chaplain corps [image 1 of 2], January 8, 2016, U.S. Air Force, <https://www.dvidshub.net/image/2364720/learning-lean-chaplain-corps>.

**Page 16:** Scott Kuhn, UMTs provide support to soldiers [image 2 of 4], September 28, 2018, U.S. Army, <https://www.dvidshub.net/image/4787774/umts-provide-support-soldiers>.

**Page 17:** Jessica DuVernay, UMT provide support to soldiers [image 3 of 4], September 27, 2018, U.S. Army, <https://www.dvidshub.net/image/4787780/umts-provide-support-soldiers>.

**Page 17:** Jeff Drew, Faith on the 'front line': service members find strength in Afghanistan [image 5 of 5], November 24, 2011, U.S. Marines, <https://www.dvidshub.net/image/491233/faith-front-lines-service-members-find-strength-afghanistan>.

**Page 18:** True Thao, Chaplains [image 2 of 4], August 12, 2011, U.S. Army Reserve, <https://www.dvidshub.net/image/442849/chaplains>.

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