

Chaplains to His Majesty's Forces Speech—General Assembly 2023

Rev Scott Brown

Moderator,

It is my privilege to present the report of the Committee on Chaplains to His Majesty's Forces.

Our report outlines some of the areas in which our Forces, and their Chaplains, have been deployed over the past year – from supporting the NATO response to the war in Ukraine, both overseas and in training Ukrainian personnel here in the UK, to stepping in at our borders in response to industrial action, to flying the flag for UK interests in the Pacific, and in the South Atlantic, in the Middle East and in Cyprus, to name but a few.

What each of these locations, and many others, have in common is that our Chaplains are with their people where they are, sharing the highs and the lows of Service life, while colleagues at home care for their families and loved ones.

Your predecessor Moderator, Dr Greenshields, and I had the opportunity to hear at first hand, during his visit to the Army, of the Padre's role – the spiritual and pastoral role, but also in the development and delivery of ethical leadership training, and the Army's response to moral trauma. We were humbled by the work of the Joint Casualty and Compassionate Centre, not only in their historical work to match names to bodies found even today in the battlefields of World War 1, but their 24/7 ability to get personnel home when required. One example was a sailor who was in a ship in the Arabian Gulf; his father was seriously ill, he was flown into Kuwait City in the ship's helicopter, a commercial air flight to London, an RAF flight to Glasgow, and a taxi to the Royal Alexandra Hospital in Paisley. From the family contacting the JCCC, the sailor was at his father's bedside in 10 hours.

Every Chaplain sitting before you will have their own stories, of caring for the spiritual and pastoral care of their people, of simply, at times, being there.

Let me give you a couple of examples from my own experiences:

I remember being flown to Singapore to join HMS LIVERPOOL following a suicide onboard, and being asked by a group of sailors to light a candle and say some prayers in the compartment where their friend had died. The ship's company were in shock, as was the

Command. It was a week of listening and caring. A real pastoral privilege. I am still in touch with the Commanding Officer to this day.

Being the Chaplain in HMS CARDIFF in what we now call the second Gulf War, in the Northern Arabian Gulf. We were in action coveralls, carrying gas masks and life jackets, and wearing anti-flash hoods. There was a threat of a gas attack, or worse.

I had put out a box of New Testaments in the Junior Rates dining hall, and they quickly disappeared. One night doing my usual pastoral rounds of the ship, I entered the main Communications office.

‘Ah Padre, just the man we need, the expert, how many do you know off by heart?’ I knew I was being led into a trap. They had started the New Testament at the beginning, as you would, were reading Matthew’s Gospel, and were seeing who could memorise the most names from the genealogy of Jesus! The highs, the lows and sometimes the ridiculous!

The bond between the Chaplain and your flock, including the Command at every level, is enduring, is built upon decades of being seen as trustworthy, of being approachable, of being confidential, of being where your people are – in a ship, in a trench, in the back of an armoured personnel carrier, or in an aircraft hanger – wherever our people are, it is the ministry of Christ’s church, and in our name, that our Ministers take up that call, with the personal sacrifices that come with any ministry, for the Chaplain and their family.

I would invite any eligible Minister to get in touch with myself, or any member of the Committee, if you would like to begin to explore what ministry in the Forces could mean for you, either full-time as a Regular or as a Reservist. I cannot commend it more highly to you.

Moderator, today is an opportunity again to give our thanks to those who serve in this unique community, that in the highs and lows, they may know that they are held in the prayers of the church.

Moderator, I am not a Commissioner and would invite the Principal Clerk to move the deliverance.

Moderator, one of the members of His Grace’s suite is Admiral Sir Ben Key, the First Sea Lord and Chief of the Naval Staff. I have personally served with the Admiral and know that he is a great supporter of Chaplaincy. Moderator, the Committee would be very pleased should you choose to invite him, and if it be the will of the General Assembly, I am sure the Admiral would be willing address us.