The Military Chaplaincy

Part 1 of 2: The Ministry of a Military Chaplain
with Darrell Bock, Justin Roberts
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I’m Darrell Bock, Executive Director for Cultural Engagement at the Hendricks Center and you’re here at The Table podcast where we discuss issues of God and culture. And our topic today is the military chaplaincy. Well, it’s the military chaplaincy and it’s also about movies, if you can put those two things together. My guest is Justin Roberts who graduated from the media arts program here at Dallas Theological Seminary. Welcome, Justin.

Thank you. Thank you.

Justin is a military chaplain who is stationed in Germany. In fact, he is going to go from this taping directly onto a plane and back to Germany. So we hope he gets lots of rest tonight. But he also is responsible for helping to publicize a movie called The Hornet’s Nest that will be out in DVD shortly and that is about the military experience. And so we thought we’d have Justin in to talk about the military chaplaincy, about the military and Christians in the military and kind of the mix that that represents, and let him share a little bit about that experience as a part of the kind of ministry that our grads sometimes fall into as their calling.

Justin, tell us a little bit about yourself. First, a little bit about your training for both the military and for theology. Most people don’t put those two together quite so easily. And then how you ended up being connected to the film.

It’s funny because I know so many chaplains who play guitar and so they have that skill set. I have no musical talent. I can’t even clap and sing at the same time. But I love photography and I love film and I love writing. So when I got to DTS, I wasn’t even aware when I first came here that they had a media arts program. I wasn’t even tracking at the time. And so when I got here, I discovered that, and I was like, “That’s exactly what I want to do.” So I got a masters in biblical studies and a masters in media arts and communication.

But I was still on track to go into the chaplaincy and so I took those loves with me still and when I got into the army, I continued doing photography and started studying cinematography and also continued to work on writing. And that when we deployed, I just talked to my command team and asked, “Is it okay if I carry a camera?” So that’s what has kind of spiraled into this.
What lead me out to the missions, actually going on the patrols and stuff, I had a really good first sergeant who was a mentor of mine. And I asked him before I deployed, I was like, “How should I do this ministry,“ because I had never done it before. I was a very green chaplain. I literally showed up to my first training exercise with my helmet cover on backwards. So they mentored me, and I needed that. So God does provide.

So he told me, when I asked him, he was like, “The one thing you need to do, you need to go out on patrols with the guys, you need to be near the front during major operations so that way you can pray, do your chaplain stuff. Pray over the guys when they’re wounded and pray over the guys if they’re dying.” So I made that my mission to go on those patrols to connect, and it does work. If you’re with people where they’re hurting the most, that’s when they begin to trust you.

So in the midst of that, I was still carrying my camera and just snapping away and just capturing some of the experience. And during Operation Strong Eagle III, which is one of the largest operations, one of the largest battles in the war, we landed into a valley that had roughly 400 Taliban fighters and we had about 400, too. So it was a pretty bad firefight.

So during that time, there was a reporter named Mike Boettcher. He was America’s longest working war correspondent. Well, we met. I had some footage and he had some footage. I asked my command team if I could lend him the footage for his news piece. Well, he put together a news story for Nightline that was a Memorial Day special, and that wound up winning two Emmys. Once it won two Emmys, he started doing talks with Hollywood and that’s how it spiraled into The Hornet’s Nest. So some of my footage is in that film and I’m a co-executive producer on it.

Dr. Darrell Bock: I see. Now your training here was primarily on the area of writing, is that right?

Justin Roberts: Yes, sir.

Dr. Darrell Bock: Okay. So you’ve kind of transferred now. So I take it you’re both writing and filming now?
Justin Roberts: Yes, sir.

Dr. Darrell Bock: That’s great.

Justin Roberts: Put them together and you’re pretty much directing.

Dr. Darrell Bock: [Laughter] Very good. So let’s talk a little bit about military and chaplaincy. You know, some people wrestle with that combination in one way or another. Many people perceive, and rightfully so, wrestle with the fact, you know, that Jesus talks about “Blessed are the peacemakers” and that kind of thing. There’s almost a pacifist orientation or a pacifist leaning in some elements of the New Testament. So how do you put that together in terms of being a military person who’s a Christian who’s there to minister and serve? How do you put that together?

Justin Roberts: I definitely don’t want to speak on behalf of all theology or all chaplains on this one. As far as me personally, it never struck up an issue with me because my number one goal is to take care of my soldiers and to minister to them. And then if anybody else comes into my circle, like with the Afghans, then absolutely to care for them as well. Now that’s where I stand. Of course I do, and I’m serving guys who are warriors, who are bringing war upon others. So then we start getting into just war theory.

Dr. Darrell Bock: Some people don’t even know about just war theory. I’ve done pieces myself when the Iran war broke out with Iraq, rather. I did a piece for the Dallas Morning News that discussed just war in relationship to passivism because people know I already do a lot of writing about Jesus. So some people aren’t aware of the distinction between individual ethics, if you will, and the right of the State to defend its people and to have a military and that kind of thing. That’s, in some ways, what I was alluding to.

And so the point being that the chaplaincy is there because the military obviously is a high stress situation in which people are risking life and limb. There’s a lot of trauma that goes into being in the military. There are terrific responsibilities. There’s separation from home. There’s just a lot, at a personal level, to deal with if you’re in the military. So the idea of a minister coming alongside who has some both theological and counseling background that can help with someone in that situation makes sense to have. So that’s what chaplains do, isn’t it?
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Justin Roberts  Yeah. And this is something, too. The workload is always a heavy workload and just by that, I think, it proves its need. I’ll do three or four1counselings a day and it’s going to be divorces, it’s going to be depression, PTS, a litany of issues that are bubbling up under the surface. These are a lot of people who have been through combat who have been traumatized. So that is our job is just to walk with them as pastors and care for them, and care for the program. That’s our role.

As far as the day to day functions –

Dr. Darrell Bock  I was going to ask you about that next. What does a chaplain do? Sundays might be transparent as to what might happen on a Sunday. But why don’t you take us through a normal week and then come to Sunday. What does a chaplain do?

Justin Roberts  Oh. I don’t know if I’ve ever had a normal week because it really is, I’m an emergency responder a lot of times, too. So when I get three a.m. calls that somebody is having a suicidal ideation, I’m going to respond to that. So average chaplains are going to have around 800 people to care for in their battalion so they are going to meet whatever that need is, as pastors. There’s always going to be a lot counseling; I think that’s the bread and butter of the job.

But it’s also working as a staff officer for the commander. We’re going to report to him as far as the health and morale of the unit. How are the guys doing? What are the trends? How can the unit try to help meet those needs? Somehow you fit in your Sunday service where the sermon fits. I always kind of joke around, it seems like other pastors will have about ten hours or so to kind of work on their sermon. We’ll have two. So I hope it is good quality.

Dr. Darrell Bock  So there’s a lot of pastoral care. There are so many questions that are lined up here; I’m not sure which one to deal with. But let me deal with one that might not be transparent to most people but they might think about once I ask it. That is, we talk about in our Constitution that there is a separation of church and state, and yet the tradition of a chaplaincy goes way, way back. So obviously there is no Constitutional challenge to chaplains existing with the army because of the historic association that has existed.
Justin Roberts It’s also their rights. First off, the first two people that Washington appointed in the military was first the Infantry. The second was the chaplain. Okay, we’ve got all these rowdy guys. Let’s get somebody for these rowdy guys.

Dr. Darrell Bock [Laughter] Yeah. And Washington is very famous for having given, in a farewell speech, made the observation that religion is really the pillar, the stability of a society. So he was very much committed of the presence of religion without endorsing any particular strain of faith. And that’s how the chaplaincy is run. Am I right?

Justin Roberts Yes. And it’s a natural part of the fabric of society. It’s something that is never going to be removed. We ebb and flow throughout time as far as religious positions are concerned. But religion is always going to be present. And as far as people’s Constitutional rights, soldiers, all military has Title 10 rights. They have the right to practice their faith, and the providers of those faiths are chaplains of Protestant, Catholic, Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, all of these faiths. And when we’re in a war zone, we still have the right to practice those faiths, and those faiths need leaders. Guidance. So that’s what the chaplain core brings to the table.

Dr. Darrell Bock So the chaplaincy is made up of people of all kinds of faith, so it’s diverse like our society is.

Justin Roberts Yes.

Dr. Darrell Bock Okay. Well, we’ve covered the legal ground.

Justin Roberts It’s a Constitutional right that we’re exercising on their behalf. So it’s not proselytizing; it’s just providing.

Dr. Darrell Bock Okay. Well, that explains the rationale of the chaplaincy. You’ve talked a little bit about what you do, that you do a lot of counseling. You’ve talked a little bit about suicide. You’ve brought up that element.
I take it that the military wrestles with, because of the traumatic situation in which soldiers find themselves, that there are probably at least two or three key issues that come up regularly. One is wrestling with maintaining, for those who are married, maintaining their marriages while they are away and, often times, completely separated from their family and the dynamics that that means not only while they’re away but also their dynamics when they return and the unit comes back together and the adjustments that have been made. I know many stories I’ve heard among military. They’re married, they go away, their wife has been running everything at home for a long time. They come back and there’s that readjustment and she now understands how the home works. [Laughter]

**Justin Roberts**  
Better than he does.

**Dr. Darrell Bock**  
That’s right. And sometimes they’ve bore this responsibility for a very long period of time because time in service away can last for a long time. So there’s that. There’s just the pressure and the trauma of facing battle, if I can say. And then there’s the trauma of having gone through battle, if I can say it that way. So you mention suicide ideation and I know the military wrestles with and keeps its eye on caring for veterans in light of the trauma that they’re put through. Let’s talk about that a little bit from the chaplain’s side. Is that the major area of counseling, or a major area of counseling that you have is the trauma related to battle? Or is it all over the map?

**Justin Roberts**  
It’s all over the map. And it also depends on what is currently going on in the unit. So as we gear up to deploying and counseling shifts into pre-deployment issues, the stresses of leaving the family. The stresses for the family of losing their soldier. And then during the deployment there’s going to be a litany - it could be trauma issues, it could be depression issues. It could be just the anxiety of war.

And then as they come home, that transition, too. Marital problems and parenting issues. How do I take on that new role again? Financial issues. Depression and sleep issues. It’s hard not to be broken when you’re going through war. There’s going to always be fractures. Nobody gets through it completely, just normal. You’re going to be changed by it. That doesn’t mean that you have to be negatively changed. But you are going to be changed. There’s going to a transformation.
And that’s not just for the soldiers; that’s also for their spouses and their families. They’re going to go through a transformation as well. It’s just trying to guide that towards a positive direction, towards strengthening and more resiliency. So that’s how we try to walk along side them in the midst of that. I wish there were definite trends that we could talk to; it’s all a target to shoot at.

**Dr. Darrell Bock** So when you minister, you’re ministering to the soldier and to the family?

**Justin Roberts** Yes.

**Dr. Darrell Bock** So when you talk about dealing with family transitions, you’re talking about dealing with the husband and the wife and the children.

**Justin Roberts** And the kiddos. Yeah.

**Dr. Darrell Bock** Wow. So you were in Afghanistan for awhile?

**Justin Roberts** Yes, sir. From 2010 to 2011, so for 12 months.

**Dr. Darrell Bock** So are most deployments, are they year long? Are they six months long? How does that vary?

**Justin Roberts** It depends on the branch. It’s usually 12 months. But I think they have now geared it toward nine month deployments. And we’re starting to wind down, which is good.

**Dr. Darrell Bock** So someone runs the house at home and the husband, in effect, or the wife, has been away for anywhere from nine months to a year and they drop back in. Kids are a little more grown up and everything has changed. All the marital dynamics that you had before you left have been altered.
As my wife and I like to joke when we change countries, we’ve lived in Germany four separate times for a year, it’s like you’re stationed in Germany. All the rules of how we manage our marriage in the United States change when we go to Germany because things just operate in a different way. The culture accepts certain people doing certain things and less accepting of certain people doing certain things. So all that adjustment happens. And the same thing happens within family dynamics, too, I take it.

**Justin Roberts**

Yeah. Hopefully they get enough contact during the year. But there’s only so much that can be communicated through Skype and through a telephone. So things do change. One of the amazing things is the process of it, that the communication is kept up and they keep reaching out and focusing on each other and then their marriage can be strengthened by it.

Whenever I went on a deployment, I remember halfway through it I was like, “I am never going to take for granted the time that I have with her, the time that I have with my family.” It’s not something you’re really aware of until it’s taken from you. So it can be a blessing in the midst of it. But it’s different for everybody on how that transition happens. It’s always difficult. Change is always difficult, I guess.

**Dr. Darrell Bock**

So we’ve talked about some family and family dynamics and how that works. You mentioned two other things that I think are important. You talked about depression which is interesting, and then obviously the trauma of war. Let’s go through those two.

Depression, is there a way in which that is peculiar in the context of the military? Or would you say no, it’s just the nature of the pressure people are put under.

**Justin Roberts**

Yeah, I think it’s just the nature of the stress that everybody is being put on throughout a deployment that can pop up. I think it can pop up, I think fairly for a lot of people, especially if they’ve been through combat. Because no matter what happens, the brain still have to process what’s going on. This is a lot of new stuff that human beings just naturally do not cope well. Especially you’re being shot at, you have a friend who is dying, possibly close to you. So these are traumatic things.
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So how people process that when they get back is difficult, especially if they’re not working with somebody, talking about it. They don’t know how to talk about it. So that’s something we encounter fairly often. And it’s normal, and it’s okay.

**Dr. Darrell Bock**  That’s right. And obviously, the trauma of war can be intense and that’s part of why suicide can sometimes be a problem in the military because people do have a lot of trouble sometimes processing what they see and what they’ve experienced.

I’m going to shift a little bit. I take it The Hornet’s Nest is about a soldier’s experience. Is that a fair way to say it?

**Justin Roberts**  Yeah. And so what Mike Boettcher did, he is America’s longest working war correspondent. So over 30 years he’s been doing this job and, just like soldiers, he would go on his deployments to report. So he’d be away from his family again and again and again. And his son, because of that, Carlos, they just had a lot of separation. So when Mike let him know that he was going to be going on this next deployment to cover the soldiers, the Marines, his son asked if he could go just so that way they could connect and have that time together.

**Dr. Darrell Bock**  How old was he at the time?

**Justin Roberts**  I think he was like mid-twenties. And Mike Boettcher is a little bit older. Don’t tell him I said that.

**Dr. Darrell Bock**  [Laughter] Okay.

**Justin Roberts**  So they spend that time, I’m not sure how long it was but I know it was a good, long time, stationed with the Marines in Helmand province, one of the most dangerous places, and then up in Kunar province, the other dangerous place. So that’s their story. It’s the story of a father and son, their relationship, and also the lessons that they learned from these soldiers in the midst of that place.

**Dr. Darrell Bock**  So the point of the view is from the point of view of the reporter and his son.

**Justin Roberts**  Yes.
Dr. Darrell Bock  And the footage is footage that both you and he shot?

Justin Roberts  Yes, sir. And Carlos. I come in probably during the third act; you can see some of my footage there.

Dr. Darrell Bock  Okay. So Carlos is the son?

Justin Roberts  Yes, sir.

Dr. Darrell Bock  Okay. And so you are giving people the feel of not just what reporting on war is about but what the war experience itself is about for the soldiers. People are used to going and seeing war films that are either about something in the history in the past that’s usually a made-up story or somewhat made-up, as opposed to being a reflection of kind of the real experience. Would you consider this more of a documentary or –

Justin Roberts  It is. It is. But the way that it’s cut, it’s more like a feature film. It’s not a slow documentary. It’s fast-paced, and bullets are flying. It’s the hard stuff, but the stuff that I think we need to see as a country. We need to have this conversation as the war is coming to a close. We need to begin discussing these things because this is a good segment of our population who has fought this war on our country’s behalf. So we need to understand it.

Dr. Darrell Bock  Okay. So there are multiple points, I take it, to the film. One is obviously is just the human story of this reporter and his son and how they operate in this kind of an environment. The second is to give an appreciation, I take it, for what it is that someone who is in the military goes through by serving overseas and giving a glimpse of what that looks like. And it sounds like part of it is to enhance people’s appreciation for what service in the military means, but to push it in a less abstract direction, if I can say it that way. We’re talking about more than applauding for the serviceman who we see at the airport, which I’ve seen several times, or allowing them to get on the plane first. You’re talking about, in part, a substantive of societal response and appreciation for someone who is in the military who comes back because their sense of displacement, if I can use that word, when they come back, having processed going through a war and now trying to reenter society, is actually one of the more difficult transitions that a military person can have. Is that
Justin Roberts: Yes. And that’s the thing. I don’t think it wraps itself in the flag. What I think it does is it simply shares their stories. These are guys, these are gals. They’re just human beings. They have kids. And so understanding them past just being a number, a statistic in a war zone or just a distant coverage from a newsroom. These are the human beings who are fighting this war, and you can’t really understand this war without understanding that these are people.

So that’s what this film is trying to do is just to simply share their stories and, in the midst of it, the reporter’s story, his own experience of it and what he’s experiencing, what he’s learning from it. So that’s what we’re trying to push home.

Dr. Darrell Bock: And in the midst of doing that, I take it that part of the goal is to give people really a deeper appreciation for the level of sacrifice that’s involved in serving in the military overseas. I could ask you what’s the mission of the film.

Justin Roberts: Just naturally through the stories, whenever you hear them, it’s not something that has to be fictionalized in any way, or prompted or manipulated. It’s just simply telling the story of these guys. And when you get to know them, these are my friends. I’m insanely impressed by these guys and what they have been through and what they’re striving for.

We have several guys who were wounded whenever they were over there, and then chose to come back to the unit. And they could have stayed home, they honestly could have. But they chose to come back to their guys because they love their guys. And if that doesn’t impress you as a human being I have no idea what will. And it doesn’t have to be manipulated; it doesn’t have to be construed. That is what happened.

So it’s an evidence of love. It’s an evidence of their true care for the people that they’re fighting with. And that inspires me. That pumps me up. It makes me proud.