

THE WAR BOOM IN RELIGION

by Stanley High



Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, the boys in our Army and Navy are flocking back to the faith of their fathers. . .

The story of a modern miracle told by a famous minister

✱ THIS time few thought there'd be room for religion in the duffel bags of our soldiers. For this generation of Americans was raised in the scoffing, debunking era that followed the first World War. In the literature and classrooms of those years God was widely held in disrepute, the church discredited, and faith patronizingly passed off as a crutch for the weak or an escape for the ignorant. Many young people gave religion only their negative attention. They aimed to manage without it.

When mobilization began, the Government, as usual, undertook to provide spiritual ministry for the men. But many veteran clergymen doubted whether religion would catch on.

But religion has caught on—and with such vigor that the chaplaincy services have been swamped by it. Army and navy chapels are jam-packed. Demands for special services, for Bible study and religious instruction, are more than can be met. Many men—Protestant and Catholic—are being baptized or confirmed. Some chaplains report an almost overwhelming interest in religion and the church as a career.

In short, the men in uniform, in one of the most amazing developments in our religious history, appear to have made up their minds to wind up our era of glib skepticism, once and for all, and return, en masse, to religion.

For the year that ended June 30, 1941, soldier attendance at army religious services totaled nearly 12,000,000. The indicated figure for 1942 is much larger.

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During the sweltering month of August, when civilian church attendance drops to its year-round low and many churches are closed, the 41,000 soldiers at Fort Jackson, S. C., last year averaged 85 per cent at services every Sunday. During last Lent, at the replacement center at Fort Bragg, N. C., the chaplain in charge estimated the average attendance at Sunday services at above 90 per cent.

Prior to the dedication of the army chapels at Fort Dix, N. J., a few months ago, church services held in tents, mess-halls, and from the tailboards of trucks were consistently well attended. Opening of the chapels increased attendance 125 per cent. In *(Continued on page 131)* February one division there reported about 75 per cent of its officers and men went to church every Sunday.

Why they are going in such numbers is a question which I have asked in many army camps and naval stations. It is not because of compulsion—because there is none. For men on active duty, church attendance is voluntary in both the Army and the Navy. Neither is it because of a lack of anything else to do. No men in uniform ever had less time on their hands than today's soldiers and sailors.

The reasons for their return to religion are on a higher level.

THERE is a widespread feeling that the present state of the world is largely a result of the standards we've been trying to live by. And if this is the best that those standards can produce, then they are phony and it's time we got some new ones. The search for new ones is bringing our men around to religion—the oldest standard of them all. In their return, perhaps, there is the promise of a new age of faith.

"Compared to the last war," a veteran minister-chaplain told me, "the religion in this army looks like a revival. Compared to the average community, there is more religion per square mile in an army camp than in any civilian area of the country."

Soldiers in a Western camp recently suggested a "Churchgoing contest." No orders were issued; no prizes promised. The men did their own promoting. First place went to a bombing squadron which, for a month, had 80.5 per cent of its personnel at Sunday services; second place, to the Chemical and Signal Corps, with a 70.5 per cent turnout.

FOR Good Friday, the chaplains of a division in a camp in the Midwest announced a three-hour service of devotion. Despite the length of the service and the large number of men on Easter furloughs, more than 3,000 appeared.

At a naval training station the Roman Catholic chaplain announced that for nine days there would be special 6:30 A. M. Masses for men who desired to make a Novena of Masses as a Mother's Day tribute. More than 200 completed the novena.

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In army camps, on ships, and at naval stations, Bibles and religious literature are not indiscriminately passed out as they were in the first World War. This time, the men themselves have to come to the chapel or the chaplain's office and ask for them. There was some fear, in the beginning, that leaving the initiative to the men would result in a decreased Bible distribution. But in all of the camps and stations which I have visited the demand has outrun the supply.

During the 12 months up to June 1, the American Bible Society alone had had nearly 1,000,000 copies of its Protestant editions of the Scriptures given out among our armed forces. At present, the Society is printing Testaments for army and navy use at the rate of 9,000 a day, a pace far ahead of that of the last war. In addition, the Gideon Society, early this year, launched a plan to supply 25,000 copies of the Scriptures each week.

Meanwhile, the Government, itself, has published for the Army three editions of the Scriptures—one, each, for Protestants, Catholics, and Jews.

A Protestant chaplain on a naval training ship took me to the chapel he had "rigged" in what had been the officers' mess. "When I came aboard," he told me, "I wasn't sure what sort of reception religion would have among these men, all of them college graduates or postgraduates, and all of them up to their ears in the toughest kind of training. I saw my first class graduate last week. After they had gone I found \$200 on my desk which they had raised to buy an altarpiece for this chapel."

In a division which I visited in the Middle West, 100 soldiers applied to the Roman Catholic chaplain for Confirmation. Undeterred by the strenuous maneuvers in which they were participating, all of them managed to complete their courses of instruction. The entire class was confirmed at one service early this spring.

The chaplain in an artillery outfit received a request from the men of a certain battery to hold a prayer service in the chapel for the recovery of a desperately sick comrade. When the service was held, every able man in the battery appeared.

An army private, not given to much church-going at home, recently wandered into a week-night service at his regimental chapel. "After a day's training in war and sudden death," he later wrote his parents, "it was like entering a different world. The lights were dim and an organ was playing. The service itself lasted only an hour, but it was one of the happiest hours I have spent in the service of my country."

IN THE last war, chaplains were sometimes treated as a fifth wheel in the military machine. They were called on to run sporting events, help with entertainments, serve as post or ship librarians and postmasters, tend canteens. Church was usually held wherever, on short notice, a place could be cleared. There was no Office of Chief of Chaplains.

Despite these handicaps, many of the chaplains of the first World War made an enviable record of service to their men. Although non-combatants, more members of the Army

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Chaplains Corps, in proportion to their numbers, were killed than in any other branch of the service.

In this war, the function of the chaplain is religious. Both the War and Navy Departments expect him to concentrate on that job and will back him to the limit.

“Don’t fritter away your time and energy,” says the welcoming letter from Chaplain William R. Arnold, the Army Chief of Chaplains, “with activities which have no practical relationship to your chief duties as a teacher of God’s law and a minister of God’s grace. And don’t permit anyone else to waste or misdirect your energies.”

VISIBLE proof that, in this counsel, the Government means business is provided by the Army’s newly built chapels. Prior to 1940, there were only 17 chapels on all the Army’s 160 posts. In 22 years the total expenditure for chapel buildings amounted to \$969,000. In March, 1941, the War Department authorized the construction of 604 chapels at a total cost of \$13,000,000. Ground for the first was broken in April, 1941. All of them, and approximately 200 more, are completed. Another hundred are under construction.

But, chapel or no chapel, religion in the Army travels with the troops. Chaplains accompany troop trains; participate in maneuvers; and, unarmed, go with their men into battle. For field services, each chaplain is furnished with a 50-pound organ, a field desk, typewriter, assembly tent, and chaplain’s flag. Each divisional chaplain has a 1½-ton truck and trailer complete with pulpit, portable altar, public address system, field organ, kits with materials for Catholic Mass and Protestant Communion, Bibles, and hymnbooks.

In a Southern army camp I met a husky armored regiment chaplain who, last year, spent five months on maneuvers. He wore regulation coveralls; slept in a pup tent; and, at every bivouac, drove his truck-and-trailer to the likeliest available spot, unlimbered his equipment, and held services.

“They never lasted more than three quarters of an hour, sermon included,” he told me. “We averaged more than 1,000 men at every service. No civilian congregation I’ve ever served worshiped more reverently or expressed so much appreciation for what the preacher had to say.”

Naval policy, although essentially the same as that of the Army, is necessarily adapted to the limitations of life aboard ship. Chaplains are assigned to battleships, airplane carriers, cruisers, transports, hospital ships. There is a chaplain for each destroyer squadron, but his post is aboard the destroyer tender. In the submarine service, chaplains are likewise assigned to tenders. As in the Army, the Government, for the first time, now provides Navy chaplains with ecclesiastical equipment.

All chaplains have officers’ rank, dependent on years of service. The Army Chief of Chaplains, William R. Arnold, is a brigadier general; R. D. Workman, Navy Chief of Chaplains, is a captain. New chaplains in the Army are commissioned first lieutenants; in the Navy as lieutenants, junior grade or senior grade, depending on their age.

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But the title by which chaplains are addressed invariably is "Chaplain," never "Lieutenant" or "Major" or "Commander." When saluted, the chaplains salute in return, but with an accompanying word of greeting. They carry no arms; issue no orders. The cross on their uniforms (in the case of Jewish chaplains, the insignia is the tables of the law and the star of David) is a symbol both of religion and of friendly accessibility.

The chaplain is faithful in making hospital visitations. He writes innumerable letters to parents. The latchstring on his office door is always out. Through it the men bring their troubles.

As a result of these secret outpourings the chaplain finds himself on all sorts of errands. He gets a low-priced room for a visiting sweetheart; asks parental permission for marriage, and, when he gets it, does the marrying; acts as the conveyor of bad news from son to parents, and, often, from parents to son; serves as psychiatrist-at-large on all manner of adjustment problems.

"A chaplain," I heard an admiral tell a chaplains' training school, "is a preacher plus—plus the difference between a happy and an unhappy ship."

Aboard ship in battle, the navy chaplain's station is with the chief surgeon. There, whatever his faith, he is expected to offer religious ministry to all those who are badly wounded. For serving men of a faith other than his own, the chaplains are given meticulous instruction.

"I am not a priest," says the non-Catholic chaplain, Protestant or Jew, to the Catholic, "but I have talked to a Father, and he asked me to say that since he cannot possibly be here I should read for you this prayer called 'The Act of Contrition.' Will you repeat it with me. . . . The Father also asked me to give you this rosary, which he has blessed for you, to keep, and to assure you that he grants you his blessing."

Already, at Pearl Harbor, Bataan, and Corregidor, these ministers of the faith have given proof of their heroism and devotion. Two naval chaplains were killed at Pearl Harbor. One of them, Chaplain A. H. Schmitt, was reading morning prayers aboard the battleship Oklahoma when a Jap torpedo struck. As the ship rolled over, Chaplain Schmitt helped his men, one by one, to escape—until escape for himself was finally cut off.

"There are no atheists in these fox holes," said a praying sergeant to a praying colonel during a terrific Bataan bombardment. And throughout that heroic defense 29 American chaplains brought religious ministry to the men. Six were decorated.

ONE Bataan chaplain reported that in six weeks of front-line religious duty he had traveled 2,000 miles. "For a month," said a Catholic chaplain, "I have held Mass in a different place each day." "Hundreds of boys," another reported, "are asking for Bibles. The Bible is being read here as I've never seen it read before."

Easter services, on Corregidor, were directed by Chaplain Perry O. Wilcox, of Elmira, N. Y. On Easter eve a strapping, unshaven, duty-begrimed soldier appeared at Chaplain Wilcox's office.

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"I want to be baptized tomorrow morning," he said. "I've neglected it long enough."

For the large company of officers and men and army nurses who were present, the baptism of this soldier—the dust and sweat of battle still on him—was the Easter climax on Corregidor.

Thus, in camps at home and on distant battle fronts, the word of God goes with our fighting men. In religion, millions of our boys are discovering a new source of strength and courage.

What the Chief Chaplains of the Army & Navy Say About Mr. High's Article

This article by Mr. Stanley High is most timely. Too many people still think that the Army necessarily brutalizes a man, that a real soldier must learn to stab and shoot and cast bombs with a spirit of hate and revenge in his heart, and that for relaxation he needs plenty of strong liquor, lewd entertainment, and easy access to vile women.

Fathers and mothers, wives and sweethearts are gloriously willing to make any clean sacrifice for their country, but they dread terribly to see a loved one return with the look of spiritual death in his eye.

We need to be certain that we are fighting on God's side in this world conflict and we need a sure means of obtaining the help of His wisdom and power. Hence, our Government has stressed the importance of religion in our armed forces and of a deep, sturdy spirituality in the heart of every soldier.



CHIEF OF CHAPLAINS,
U. S. ARMY.

Mr. High has given to the readers of THE AMERICAN MAGAZINE an illuminating picture of the place of religion in our armed forces.

Men who follow the sea are proverbially religious. And yet, never before in the memory of our oldest officers has there been such interest in religion throughout the Navy as there is today.

Speaking for those who now, as Chaplains, serve the men of the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard, we are thankful for the high honor which is ours. To be privileged to minister to the spiritual and religious needs of these officers and men—our comrades and shipmates—is one of the most satisfying experiences which can come in the life of any clergyman.

Of one thing you, the home folks, may be sure: Our nation will be safe and victory be assured if those who go forth to defend us, go in the strength of His might.



CHIEF OF CHAPLAINS,
U. S. NAVY.

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