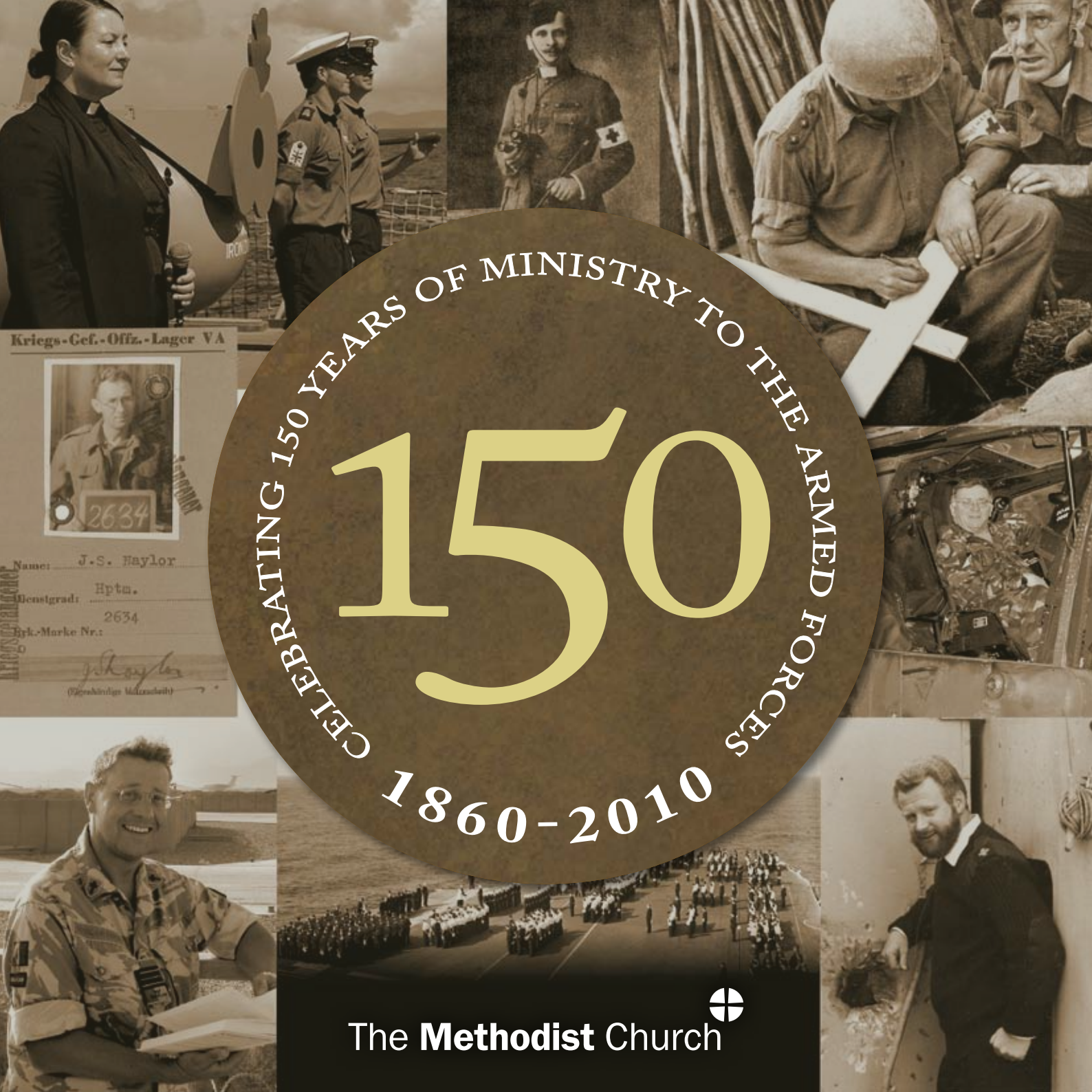
CELEBRATING 150 YEARS OF MINISTRY TO THE ARMED FORCES
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The Methodist Church

CELEBRATING 150 YEARS OF MINISTRY TO THE ARMED FORCES

150

1860-2010

The **Methodist** Church

Written and edited by Emma Kennedy and Alison Pollard

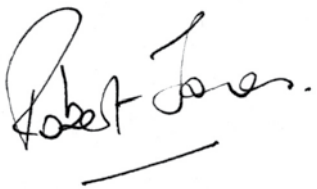
Foreword

Over a span of three years, the Wesleyan Methodist Church of the mid 19th century did three important things that set the scene for the following 150 years of ministry to the Armed Forces. In the first year they formed a trust and launched a national appeal to buy land in the garrison town of Aldershot in Hampshire. With this, they could build a place of worship and ministry for the Methodist soldiers stationed at the garrison. In the second year work began to build what became the first of two churches and, in the following year, the Home Missions Department convened the first meeting of the Army Committee – which continues to this day as the Methodist Church Forces Board.

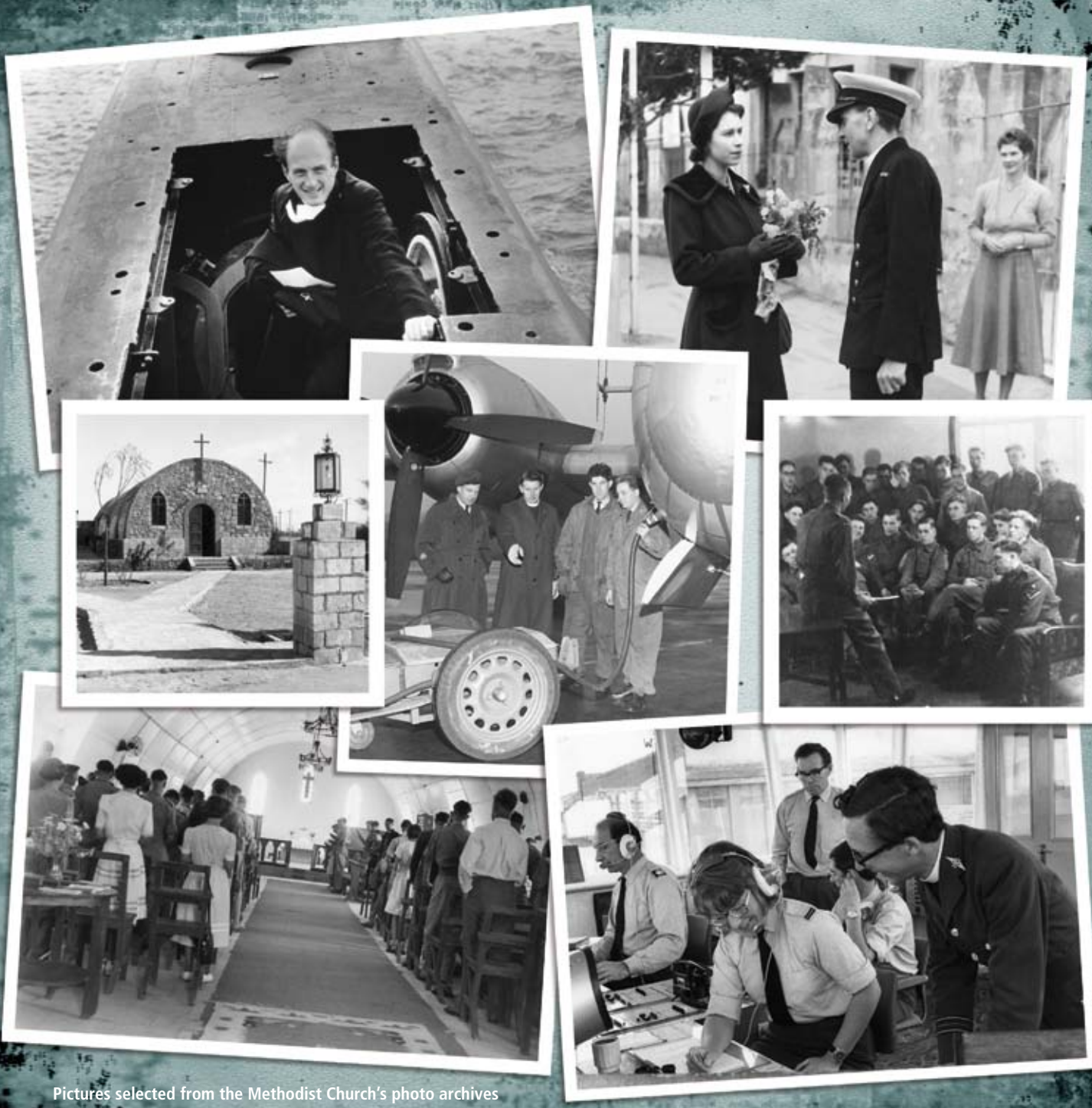
For many years Methodist ministry to the Armed Forces was organised by local congregations (including the Aldershot churches) and by a valiant group of soldier preachers – serving soldiers and sailors who had trained as local preachers. Methodist chaplains were active in the Army as early as 1881, although the Church did not allow it officially until the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. Chaplains were commissioned to the other services in the later 20th century and the following pages show that they have fulfilled, and continue to fulfil, a remarkable and courageous ministry.

Modern chaplains are non-combatants and offer critical pastoral care to servicemen and women who are under great stress and whose lives are often in danger. Their task is to live and speak in a way that addresses the pastoral and ethical issues raised by military service and, in particular, military operations. This is both a tremendous opportunity and a challenge.

Those of us without a military background, and I am one, find the privilege of coming alongside our Forces chaplains to be something immensely impressive and humbling. I commend the stories told here and those chaplains, past and present, who serve the Church with great distinction. I am glad that we have this chance to honour them.



The Revd Robert Jones
Secretary to the Methodist Forces Board



Pictures selected from the Methodist Church's photo archives

What is a military chaplain?

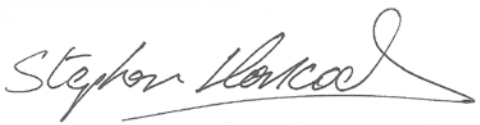
"Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'" (MARK 15:39 NRSV)

The Methodist Church has a significant heritage of sending John Wesley's preachers to serve among the British Armed Forces. A reading of *Scenes through the Battle Smoke* (a personal memoir of the Afghan and Egyptian wars by the Wesleyan army chaplain, The Revd Arthur Male) helps one appreciate this heritage. Arthur Male served, unpaid, overseas and endured harsh and violent conditions. Perhaps because he too saw that in his day a soldier was capable of recognising the Son of God.

The military has changed dramatically since Wesley's day, when red-coated soldiers and hardy sailors sought to remove the French from North America. The days of line upon line of ship and soldier are now long gone. The depravations of the Crimean War were only a forewarning of things to come and the twentieth century may be accurately described as a century of total war and indeed it was for the millions who suffered and died.

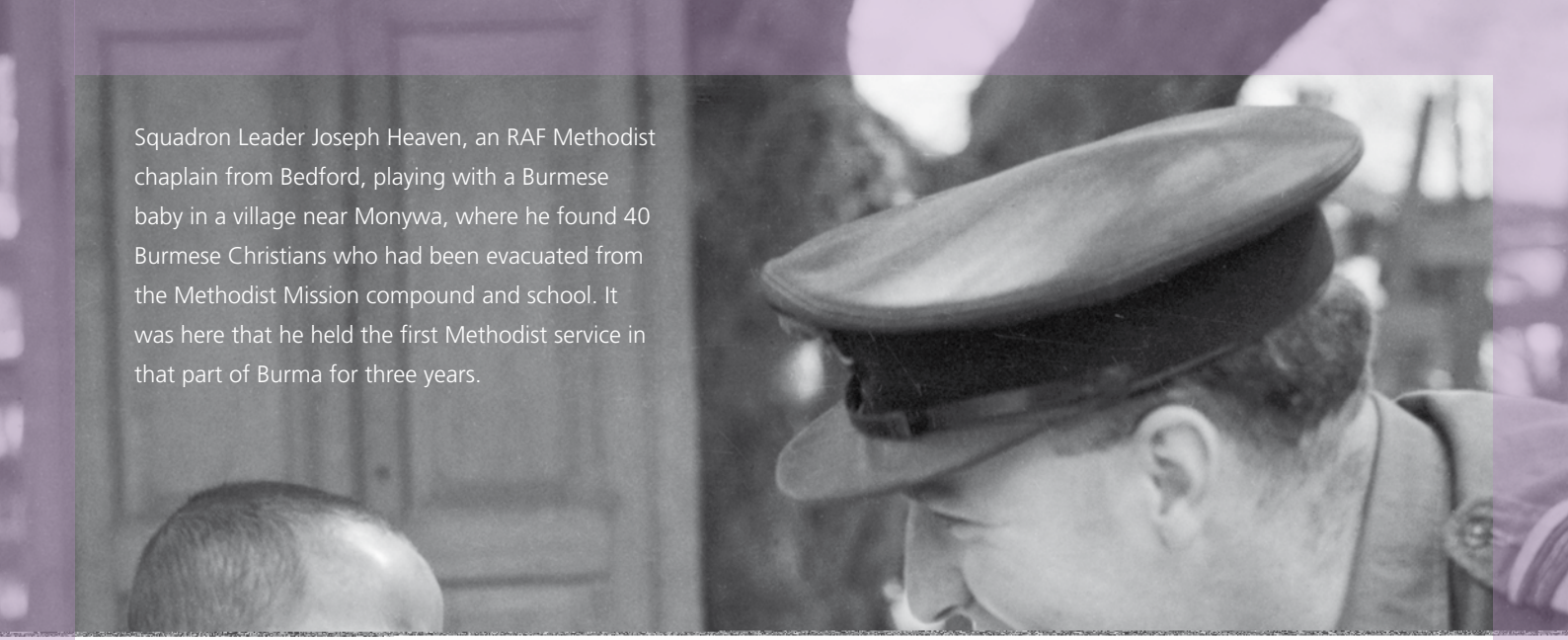
The uniforms may have changed - even the weaponry available and the ability to destroy - but two things have remained a constant throughout. First is the Methodist commitment to those who serve in the Forces, not least through the sending of its ministers to serve as military chaplains. Second is the understanding that within the Armed Forces people are capable of recognising the Son of God.

From the centurion at the Cross to chaplains serving today in the UK or overseas – Navy, Army and Air Force – little seems to have changed. People still need to experience the love of God in places where war and preparation for war is the norm. It is not always pleasant, not always fun, not always rewarding, but it is part of the great commission to 'go' and, as with the Methodist chaplains who have gone before us, we few who serve today press on in the hope that we can direct people to the Son of God.



The Revd Stephen Hancock CF
Army Chaplain
Abingdon

PHOTO: © IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM/CF 448



Squadron Leader Joseph Heaven, an RAF Methodist chaplain from Bedford, playing with a Burmese baby in a village near Monywa, where he found 40 Burmese Christians who had been evacuated from the Methodist Mission compound and school. It was here that he held the first Methodist service in that part of Burma for three years.

In 1914 - for the first time - the Methodist Church allowed its chaplains to accept paid commissions in the Armed Forces.

Robert J Rider was in his third year of training for the ministry at the outbreak of the First World War. After enlisting in 1914 he served for two years as a signalman on the front line in France. He was then recalled to Britain by the Methodist Conference and deployed to an artillery unit on the Western Front to act as chaplain to the troops.

Robert was awarded the Military Cross in 1918 for "gallantry and coolness" and for his work rescuing soldiers who had been wounded on the battle ground.

Many years later, he wrote down his experiences…

A front line British trench from the First World War

The Padre considered the possibilities of a short service.

A sand-bagged section of the reserve line trench was the chancel; the firestep did duty as altar and pulpit combined. The only musical accompaniment was the scream of the high-velocity shells and the droning tones of the larger shells tearing their way towards some unfortunate billet in the rear. The sermon was interrupted by the occasional 'rat-tat-tat' of the enemy machine guns as they swept the parapets for incautious sentries.

Upon being asked by a prisoner whether the German soldiers might have their own service…

The Padre could do no other than agree. He led the devotions in slow English, then by the aid of badly mutilated pidgin-German he introduced his subject, and then handed over the discourse to the interpreter who gave it from his elaborate manuscript.

Later in the day, he met the Commanding Officer

who came in time to help him lift to the roadside another poor fellow. He had died in the arms of the Padre, as he attempted to carry him from his dangerous position in the middle of the road … Carefully and reverently, two officers took the body from the Padre and laid it at the roadside. The C.O. remarked as they separated:

"Goodbye Padre. Mine's a pretty bad job at times, but I'm damn glad I haven't yours."

Robert J Rider

PHOTO: © ISTOCK

John at No 62 General Hospital, Tobruk, on 19 June 1942 – the night before capture

John's German identity card and disc

Letter sent to John in the prisoner of war camp from "the family and Grandma"

During the Second World War,

John S Naylor worked as an Army chaplain in north Africa and was made a prisoner of war in Italy.

In the early years of the war John ministered at a number of hospitals in Egypt and Libya. In his duties as chaplain he would spend his time assisting the medical team in caring for casualties, helping transport medical supplies and burying the dead.

In June 1942, after heavy bombardment, the 62nd General Hospital in Tobruk surrendered to the Italian-German forces. John and a number of Allied troops were captured and taken to prisoner of war camps in Italy.

In was only in the spring of 1945, after the liberation of the Dulag VA camp in Germany, that John was able to return home to his wife Barbara in England.

With No 6 General Hospital, east of Cairo

As so many different nationalities passed through the Hospital, I tried to get the Bible or parts of it, for them all … Arabic, French, modern Greek, Hebrew, Italian, German, Polish, Serb, Turkish, Russian Yugoslav … The Arabic New Testaments were for some boys who were Coptic Christians. I took services for them, and had Arabic hymnbooks and prayer books for them also.

With No 1 mobile military hospital, based at Helmich

The November push (41) began at daybreak the morning we set off, but knew nothing about it until the Friday when we saw it in the Egyptian Daily Mail. That same weekend I had my first funeral in the desert, at Oxford Circus Military Cemetery.

I took my services either in the men's Recreation Tent or, on fine days in the open air … This played an important part in our everyday life in the desert.

At the 62nd General Hospital at Tobruk

There were usually several letters to write for those incapable of writing themselves, and this I did after lunch. Burials were carried out as soon as possible, and we often went in an afternoon to Tobruk War Cemetery. If there were no burials I had a sleep, not only because of the weather, but also because we lost so much rest at night on account of air raids.

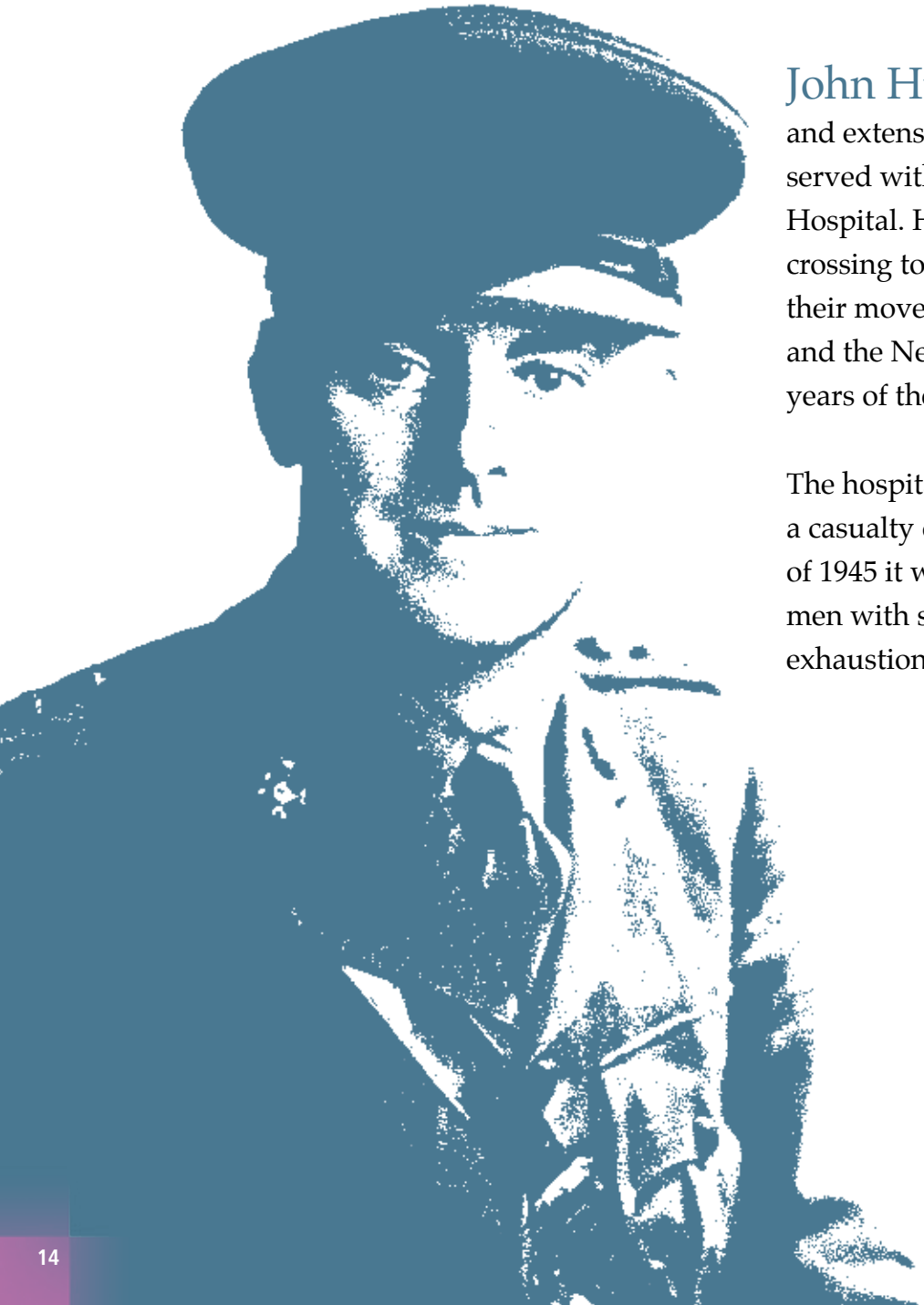
The theatres were going night and day, on 8 hour shifts, only being closed for an hour or so during the afternoon for cleaning. Putting on plaster bandages and scrubbing petrol from cuts were my specialities.

During the Siege of Tobruk

I scribbled my particulars and Barbara's address on a bit of bandage wrapping … and asked one of the sisters to write to Barbara should Tobruk fall. That Monday night we heard a new sound – shells whistling overhead as the harbour was shelled.

A tracked vehicle came into the hospital courtyard at 7.45 and we were told we were prisoners. So ended one phase of my career in the army.

A hand-drawn cartoon from John's diary



John Humphries kept a secret and extensive diary of the time he served with the No 84 General Military Hospital. His reflections detail the crossing to France with the unit and their movement throughout Belgium and the Netherlands during the last two years of the war.

The hospital originally functioned as a casualty clearing station, but in July of 1945 it was designated to receive men with self-inflicted wounds and exhaustion.

June 17 1944

We have no right to pray for victory unless we pledge ourselves to build a better world than this.

June 21 1944

It seemed reasonable to substitute myself for a patient. In such a case, what should I demand of a Padre? I should appreciate a smile and a little conversation about my family and the home town; something that would, for a time at least, clear my mind of the awful slaughter, pain and misery being wreaked upon the men in the line. Then I should want to have some assurance beyond the cataclysmic fate which has evilly engulfed the civilised world, that there is a Benign Providence which cares about the human beings who suffer thereby. I should not want a pious talk on the subject, but I should like to see the conviction firmly reflected in his eyes and expressed in all he said.

June 28 1944

A little thing has saved me from sheer misery. This evening at 9 o'clock I held a Methodist Fellowship Meeting in the Chapel tent. Ten men came along to it and during a period of quiet, we remembered our fathers and mothers, children, sweethearts and friends. I can't possibly explain what happened to me, but I do know that there are eternal values, indestructible and belonging to God.

July 17 1944

On talking to a group of soldiers with shell shock

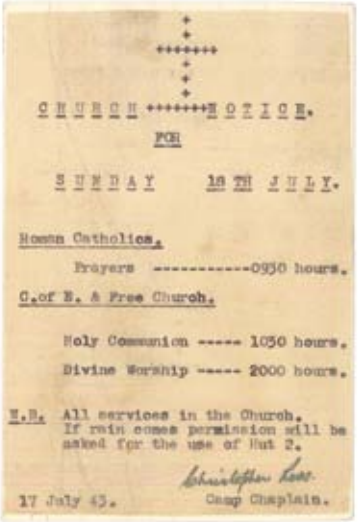
One of these lads speaks. "I can't face it again sir." I have asked them to sit on the grass with me, and I watch this lad turn over on his stomach and bury his face in his hands, as though hiding from some terrible picture which haunts him. The others look at him and – one can see it – suffer with him. What on earth can I say?

I told them of my home, my loved ones and my friends and tried to describe how their love had led me to believe in a Bigger Love which cared for me no matter what I did.

The 18th Infantry Division of the Army landed in Singapore

just weeks before the island fell to the Japanese in February 1942. The troops, along with their chaplain Christopher Ross, were marched to the notorious Changi Camp in eastern Singapore and were held there for the next four months.

In June 1942 the Division was packed into cargo trucks and taken to the Ban Pong prisoner of war camp in Thailand. At first the Japanese authorities refused to accept Christopher as a chaplain and throughout his imprisonment he faced constant opposition. His attempts to build a temporary church and hold Sunday services were constantly thwarted and makeshift hymn sheets were confiscated as allied propaganda pamphlets.



CHURCH NOTICE.

FOR

SUNDAY 18TH JULY.

Roman Catholics.

Prayers ----------0930 hours.

C.of E. & Free Church.

Holy Communion ----- 1030 hours.

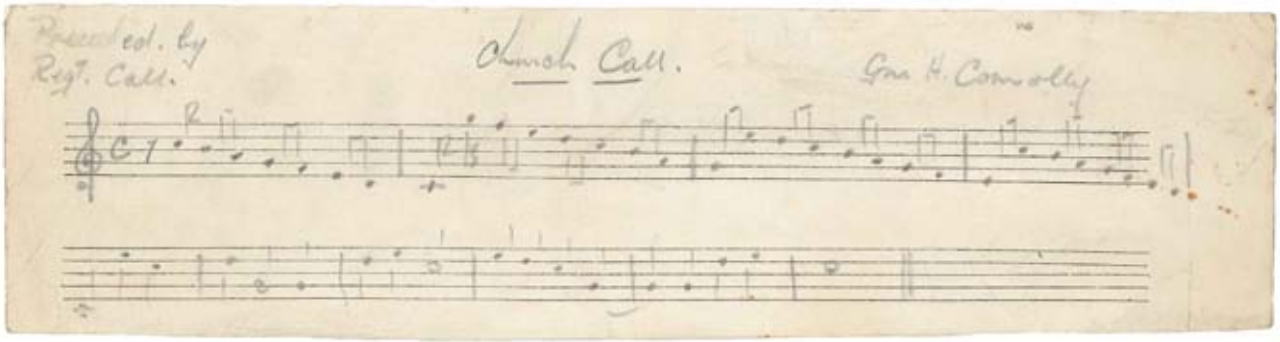
Divine Worship ----- 2000 hours.

N.B. All services in the Church. If rain comes permission will be asked for the use of Hut 2.

Christopher Ross

17 July 45. Camp Chaplain.

Church notice from the prisoner of war camp



This 'church call' was sounded on the trumpet before service in the prison camps

The end of the war came three long years later, and prisoners of all nationalities and denominations in the camp united for Holy Communion the Sunday before their release.

From 1943 to 1946

Rex Kissack wrote hundreds of letters to his wife Elizabeth, describing for her his experiences as an RAF chaplain during the Second World War.

After initial postings in Blackpool and Manchester, Rex and his unit undertook an eight-week sea voyage which took them from the Clyde Estuary in Scotland to Egypt and the Holy Land.

28 March 1943
On board the ship

This morning I preached on 'Thou shalt see it with thine eyes, but though shalt not pass over thither.' That seemed to suit a confined-to-ship congregation best.

9 April 1943

Today I've had the last verse of 'Will your anchor hold' in my mind as we creep into a port of call.

19 May 1943
RAF Helwan, Egypt

I ought to describe the Bible class. We meet in the station Quiet Room, which is really a small chapel … Each has the regulation Bible and Methodist Hymn Book.

29 January 1944
Jerusalem

On Tuesday we managed to get in the Pilgrimage to Galilee I'd planned with a party of 30. The day proved perfect, the lake glassy and the horizon clear and washed by the rain.

20 February 1944
RAF Aleppo, Syria

There is a course for Methodist Local Preachers. I will be giving a lecture or two. I haven't been given a clear indication of just what's on so I'm preparing some on the Methodist Hymn Book. These fellows get stuffed with biblical introduction etc. but never get taught anything about the hymn book. It won't be easy preparing anything without proper books…

11 January 1945
RAF Abu Suier, Egypt

I collected a quantity of roughly-hewn bread which I wrapped in the current edition of the Egyptian Gazette and I went off to the Garrison Church in Ismalia. By 3.30 there were about 150 men in the church so we had our Covenant Service. Over 100 communicated. I told them we were met on almost the same spot where the Children of Israel had gathered to cross into Sinai for the First Covenant.

Leslie Skinner was the first British chaplain to land on the Normandy beaches on D-Day. Serving with the Sherwood Rangers Yeomanry Regiment, many of whom were severely injured during the landing, Leslie quickly set to work on ensuring that the wounded were located and evacuated. This was something he would become committed to throughout the campaign and for his dedication he was awarded the Croix de Guerre with Palm and the Chevalier of the Order of Leopold II with Palm. Later in his life, for his services to the Territorial Army, Leslie was awarded the Territorial Decoration.

Leslie prepares a cross for the burial site of a soldier

6 June 1944 – D-Day

Running for beach by 07.00 under fire by 07.10. Beached 7.25 … As beached hit mine. Man either side of me wounded – one lost leg. I was blown backwards on to Bren Carrier but OK.

Started gathering wounded, mostly infantry … By mid-day concerned to pass on wounded – to whom or what?

9 June 1944
On the death of a Sherwood Ranger officer

I buried him close to the hedge near where he was killed. There was no possibility of doing otherwise. Being quite alone and reading the brief Order of Service over the grave affected me deeply.

15 June 1944

Up at 05.00 hours – did my washing – lovely day. Service of Commemoration and Thanksgiving during morning. Whole Regt. present almost to a man. 35 stayed for Communion.

I hate posting anyone 'Missing' – always so distressing for families.

2 August 1944
On writing letters to the families of casualties

Finding time to write these letters at the end of a long day or at odd moments in the midst of battle, writing in adverse conditions, possibly recasting one's mind back to a battle scene of some weeks ago was a continuing problem to us all. What was hardest was having to terminate correspondence when some member of the family wrote back again and again. It was impossible to cope.

14 September 1944

Sick in body (several times) and sick in spirit. Tired out.

30 September 1944

In evening went into polder area to recover the body. The Sqdn Leader took me forward in his dingo, left me to recover and prepared body for burial, and promised to arrange with 'replenishment wagon' to pick me up on the return journey. All OK.

The grave became the eighth in the little plot across the road near the Sionshof Hotel.

6 October 1944

During morning the first shell of a heavy bombardment landed near my dug-out when the Baroness was coming down the garden path to return my communion linen. She was killed instantly. I was merely scratched arm, leg, forehead diving for cover. Awful job telling children what had happened.

29 October 1944

11.15 service for RHQ and A. Squadron in local Dutch Reformed Church at Oosterhout. 100 men and 30 civilians.
9 H. Communion. Organist did well.

Leslie attends to the body of a fallen solider. The cigarettes were vital to mask the intense odour of decay.

PHOTO © LEONARD MCCOMBE/HULTON ARCHIVE /GETTY IMAGES

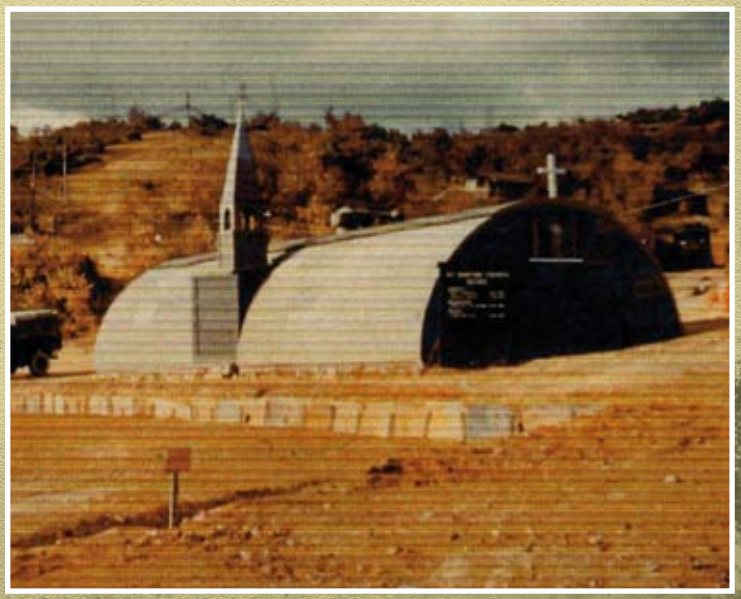
PHOTO © LEONARD MCCOMBE/HULTON ARCHIVE /GETTY IMAGES

In May 1953 Allan J Bowers received instruction from the War Office in London to proceed to the war zone in Korea where he was to serve as chaplain to the 1st Commonwealth Divisional Signals Regiment.

Allan J Bowers

As the first chaplain to live with the regiment (his initial accommodation being a small tent dug into the side of a hill) he was enthusiastically supported and, before long, a marquee tent had been erected as a temporary church and services were being held each Sunday.

Only two months later, as the armistice between the opposing forces was signed, the idea for St Martin's in the Paddy was born. The new building was made of corrugated steel (supplied by American soldiers in exchange for tinned butter and jam) and it served as a church, concert hall, officers' mess and rest centre for the regiment.



St Martin's in the Paddy

Allan later wrote down his memories of his time in the Far East.

My mind, however, was thinking … on the stark reality, that with hundreds of troops I was going up to the front line. What prospects had I of seeing the war through, indeed would I be killed or taken prisoner?

My wife sent me a packet of seeds which I planted in the landscape garden. The carpenter painted a sign and I called it 'Kew Gardens'.

After the service at St Martin's in the Paddy

There was something unique about this church; it was a kind of symbol standing between North and South Korea, pointing with its spire up to the heavens, speaking silently of the way to end the bellicosity between North and South, for God alone is the source of peace and the lover of concord.

There is an old Korean proverb – 'Expect the unexpected and in the unexpected expect Christ'.

When the war ended on 27 July 1953

There was no cheering or rejoicing and there was no celebration of the occasion, but profound thanks to God that the war was over.

Timeline

Some of the conflicts that methodist chaplains have served in

British colonial rule in South Asia (1858-1947)

2nd Afghan War (1878-1880)

Zulu War (1879)

1st Boer War (1880-1881)

2nd World War (1939-1945)

Korean War (1950-1953)

Northern Ireland (1969-2007)

Falklands Campaign (1982)

Celebrating **150 years** of military chaplaincy to the Armed Forces

Pacification of Crete
(1897)

2nd Sudan War
(1898)

2nd Boer War
(1899-1902)

1st World War
(1914-1918)

Gulf War
(1990-1991)

Balkans Conflict
(1991-1995)

Afghanistan
(2002-ongoing)

Iraq Conflict
(2003-2009)

Jake, right, with Bo'sun checking damage to the ship

Jake, left, and a colleague in their survival suits

The Falklands Campaign had its roots in a long-running dispute over the ownership of the islands between Britain and Argentina, with each country disputing the other's sovereignty. The campaign began in April 1982 (following Argentina's invasion) and lasted 74 days. In that time Britain lost and recaptured the islands. Jake Watson, a chaplain with the Royal Navy at the time, shares his most vivid memories.

It wasn't until we arrived at Ascension Island that most people started to take the possibility of war seriously. Ships were painting out their pennant numbers, which are the large identification numbers on the ship's side, and war stocks of ammunition were taken on board.

People were putting their affairs in order, with folk buying extra insurance for their families, until the companies cottoned on and stopped it. Lots of people, including me, were writing their "If you get this I won't be coming home" letters and sending them off to family and friends to hold.

Jake was in HMS Broadsword and, for that ship, the Falklands Campaign began in earnest on 20 May.

We were in the TEZ, or Total Exclusion Zone. Which is a sanitised, diplomatic term for 'killing ground'.

Being in the TEZ was tense. When you woke you prayed to get through until it was time to sleep again. When you went to bed you prayed to be alive to wake up.

After the landings, at the cry "Air Raid Warning Red", you only wanted to get through the next 15 minutes because that was how long it took the warplanes to get to us. Once you heard the guns open up on the upper deck then you prayed to get through the next 30 seconds because that's how long the attacks normally lasted.

To be killed in a blast or get to the upper deck and have a chance was acceptable to most of us, but to be severely injured or trapped below decks was not a pleasant thought. You are literally all in the same boat. You can't dig a trench or get behind a steel plate to protect you from a bomb blast. Us chaplains share the same ripples of dread as all the other Navy personnel, occasionally approaching the frontiers of terror and pleading inwardly not to break.

Jake worked alongside the medics on board the ship helping to take care of wounded sailors.

Helping the doctor extract pieces of metal from patient's skin or joking with a survivor as you try to dress a burn that once was his back was never covered in the pastoral theology course I attended.

In the midst of all this your emotions are in upheaval. There's gratitude that it's not your ship that's been sunk; jealousy because the survivors are now out of it and will be going home. And then there's the guilt that you should have such conflicting emotions at all. Faced with the realistic possibility of meeting a missile or being injured tends to concentrate the mind on priorities. The trivialities of life fall into place and the things of value take on a new prominence: family, faith and purpose.

The melting pot of conflict stripped us all back to bare personality. You can't get away with playing games with each other. There was humour and tragedy, bravery and cowardice, cruelty and compassion.

Germany is the country best known to Methodist chaplains after India . Some served in the Occupation Army in the Rhineland during the 1920s, but it was in the post-war period that it became home to so many. Methodist chaplains arrived in 1945 and took part in the transition from occupier to ally. They served through the long years of the Cold War in both West Germany and Berlin – Peter Howson among them.

Peter visiting married quarters in Sennelager, Germany, 1979

A week long course run by an Army chaplain during Peter's final year of training at Cliff College was enough to spark his interest in military chaplaincy and get him on the Forces Board list. Peter was posted to Belize in the late 70s; Cyprus came next and in the mid 80s he decided to sign up for a regular commission – a permanent position with the chaplaincy. Like most Army chaplains who have served in the last 60 years, Peter spent time in Germany. Eleven years in total.

It was at these military communities in West Germany and Berlin that Peter, like the chaplains before and after him, conducted church services against a backdrop of aircraft hidden under the pine trees.

Because Army personnel were able to bring their families to these bases much of Peter's role mirrored circuit life – baptizing babies, taking school assemblies and supporting families. But in contrast to circuit work, the hospital visits took on a different tone and the spiritual and emotional demands had their unique challenges.

Peter worked to provide a ministry that brought some normality to military families while at the same time trying to minister to soldiers and airmen who had difficult and sometimes ethically demanding duties. It was, he said, "an all soul's ministry".

Chaplains like Peter weren't exempt from challenges either. At the height of the Cold War chaplains across all denominations were frequently vilified as they were seen as siding with the military establishment. In reality, they too were wrestling with the immensely difficult ethical questions swirling around weapons of mass destruction.

Peter taking a school assembly in Sennelager

Peter in his full uniform

The Troubles in Northern Ireland

dominated the UK news for almost 40 years and a tour of duty in the country was the norm for thousands of British soldiers. As an Army chaplain Kevin Savage has a unique insight into the complexities of the military's experience of Northern Ireland.

Unusually, for a chaplain of my generation, I have only served two tours in Northern Ireland. The first was in the winter of 1986/1987 when I was looking after two infantry battalions which were spread over five counties. The second was in 2001/2002 when I was the senior chaplain for Northern Ireland. And what a contrast between the two tours!

The pace of operations in the 1980s was hectic - the deaths and injuries due to terrorist activities; the need for well-planned movement, even for chaplains; the sheer numbers of personnel involved; the destruction of civilian property and consequent depression of the local economy.

Yet underneath all that, you could still see the potential for a fine city like Belfast to make its mark once more. The difference in the country after the Good Friday Agreement (1998) was remarkable, whatever we may think of some aspects of the solution. My second tour was probably the best job I've had in the Army, not just because I had a terrific team under me, but because I had the chance to see first-hand how quickly rebuilding and recovery could take place. The problems had not magically disappeared, but there was more control and more confidence, and so a beautiful country with warm, welcoming people has had the opportunity to flourish.

Kevin, centre, with colleagues in Derry

Tim Wilkinson has been a Methodist chaplain to the Navy for 13 years, receiving his commission after spending a few years working as a probationary minister in Hartlepool. His career as chaplain has taken him from serving communities established around Naval bases, to ministering to Royal Marines on tour in Afghanistan, to leading an ecumenical team of chaplains at the Maritime Warfare School.

Leading a baptism service in Oman, 2001

Tim taking a well-earned rest, Iraq, 2003

Tim standing behind a make-shift altar leading a baptism service in Oman, 2001

It was a superintendent minister at a Ministerial Session at Synod who said to me, "Tim I think you'd do brilliantly in the Forces." And I laughed him in the face! Because, and this is not overstating it, I hated the military, from a moral, political and, quite honestly, an ignorant point of view. I'd forgotten about that conversation with the superintendent until I got the Westminster letter, which is an annual letter from the president of the Conference to all ministers. It said there was a shortage of minsters who were willing to do chaplaincy work to the armed services. And it just jumped out at me.

The rank of the chaplain in the Navy really struck me – we adopt the rank of the person we're speaking to. For me, it is Methodist chaplaincy in action, in that we're all equal, we're just ministers, not officers, and we're here to minister to everybody.

Five years after he started out as a chaplain, and after some gruelling training, Tim won the coveted green beret.

The training is a black cloud that hangs over you until you get to Commando Training Centre (CTC) and then it's an even blacker cloud once you're there!

The step up from normal training to Commando is massive. You're pushed to the point where normally you'd stop but what they tell you at Commando training is, "You can't stop. You mustn't". And you

then go beyond that point and realise that there is more to you, there is always more there.

Despite the intense training there is still always time to connect with people. I think, above anything else, we're ministers and whether things are tough or not we're the type of people who are looking out to other people around us. From day one of the training we are introduced as the guys they can go to when they have a problem, the guys who will support them and they can trust us above anyone else. So we may not tally with their assumptions about ministers but they soon recognise that you're their best friend in many respects.

I was passing out from CTC when 9/11 happened. That changed our world. I went to be 45 Commando's padre, and they were immediately deploying to the Afghanistan/Pakistan border.

You get so close to people, especially in a Commando unit, and you share with them some of the most terrifying and some of the most boring moments of their lives, but that's what deploying is all about. It's being utterly terrified now and again and completely bored most of the time.

Along with his ecumenical colleagues, Tim created a spiritual space for the Royal Marines amidst the turmoil in Afghanistan.

We used the Iona Community booklet when we got together for prayers, and it was amazing. We sat around in this little nine by nine tent and more and more young lads joined us in the evenings, and in the few months we were out they had started to learn to pray and to grow spiritually. So we printed a Commando prayer book, inspired by the Iona stuff, and it went like hotcakes. We also had little alloy dogtags made which had a cross punched out of them. We decided that with everyone who came to ask for a prayer book and a cross we would take them aside and pray for them, holding the cross in their hand and praying that it would be a symbol of God's love for them. It wasn't about saying "God is on our side", it wasn't about giving them a talisman, although I suspect for some people it might have become that. It was our opportunity to say that the cross symbolised God's love for them and that we hoped and prayed that it would symbolise that love for them at the point of their greatest need.

I believe that as Christians we need to stand for something different. What we stand for is God's love in this world, in Christ, and I think what chaplains do is that we are that 'rumour of God', right in the centre of a community.

Phyl, left, with a chaplaincy colleague

Phyl Fanning joined the Territorial Army (TA) as a soldier and later, while training to be a minister, he heard a talk about being an Army chaplain. As soon as he was able to he made the transition into chaplaincy and was commissioned in 1999 to be a TA chaplain. Four years later, because of the increasing need for chaplains, Phyl switched to become FTRS - Full Time Reserve Service. After more than a decade serving the Army Phyl's posting as chaplain will come to an end in the summer of 2010 when he will return to circuit work.

Phyl in Bosnia with the puppet he used to facilitate non-verbal workshops on peace

Dressed in robes to receive the guidon at a parade

There was quite a conceptual shift going from part time to full time. Suddenly I didn't have to attend the church council and other meetings. But because I'd been involved with the TA before becoming FTRS I was up to speed with how the Army does things – so that side was fine. But I still had to have some training. First, a couple of weeks at Amport, filling in the paperwork and finding out what unit you've been allocated to. Then it was four weeks at Sandhurst to do the PQOC - the Professionally Qualified Officers Course. We then went back to Amport for a few more weeks getting to grips with things like the accounting, which is different in the Army than in circuit.

After that I joined my unit - the aviation unit at Wattisham. And for the last seven years I have been serving about 2,000 people – a lot of families but many more young people – so I'm pastoring a civilian population as well as military personnel. Generally people spend two years here so in the time I have been here I've seen three changes of personnel, which makes for a quite a bit of upheaval. Wattisham is a fairly isolated place so loneliness can be a challenge, but the rate of change in the culture of the Army is probably the biggest challenge for me as a chaplain.

Like all chaplains, Phyl's days are varied, whether working at a base or deployed, with each bringing its own unique challenges.

I get to my office for 8.00am and spend about half an hour taking care of emails and admin. I'll do the same thing at the end of the day too. I usually have a couple of meetings with management during the day and try to meet face-to-face as much as possible with soldiers. I also go out on exercises with them.

Chaplains have to pass the fitness tests, know what to do in biological warfare and you've got to pass the weapons handling test - we need to know how to make weapons safe. And I needed that training when I was in the Balkans in 2004 and Afghanistan in 2008. While I was in the Balkans I worked with chaplains from 20 different countries. And then in Afghanistan I was a hospital chaplain, working with medics and patients. I worked with the dead as well as the living though. I was in the morgue, making sure that the proper religious observances were carried out and helping to take care of the medics who worked there. It is so important to bring a sense of dignity and care to the end of life in a war. Even through little things, like writing to the families of the dead.

There's a lot to deal with, to process, when you're a soldier and keeping a diary is a good idea. I recommend it to the soldiers I serve. I find it a helpful tool; it helps to reflect on the past.

Phyl with his 'PADRE' Land Rover

Stephen Hancock has an unusual story. He was first a soldier, but later became a chaplain. He has served in Northern Ireland, Germany, Iraq and Afghanistan, and his unique experience lends a rare insight into life on the front line.

Stephen pitches in wherever he can help

I was a soldier for six years before training for the ministry and I returned to the Army as a chaplain in 2002. While I was serving as a soldier in Berlin in 1990 I asked a chaplain, "How do you become a chaplain?" The Revd Kevin Savage (featured on page 28) took me through my local preacher course. I was posted to Northern Ireland in 1993 and another Methodist chaplain and former Chaplain General David Wilkes guided me through the end of my local preacher course and persuaded me to leave the Army and begin my ministerial training, which I did. I studied at Queens University Belfast and was ordained into the Methodist Church in Ireland. Kevin Savage had by this time moved around and was the senior chaplain, who, nine years after our conversation in Berlin, signed the paperwork in Northern Ireland for me to re-enter the Army as a chaplain!

Since becoming a chaplain I've served in Iraq twice, the first time in 2003 to a front line medical facility and then again in 2005/2006 with a cavalry regiment. I've also served in Afghanistan recently.

The transition from soldier to chaplain and the uncomfortable realities of a job that takes a person away from home are just some of the things Stephen has had to tackle. He says,

Despite the generation gap between me and the soldiers I minister to, coming back into the Army has been easy from a military point of view. However, having spent the best part of 11 years striving to become a chaplain, after I was commissioned in 2002 I sat in my room in Amport and suddenly felt quite deflated. Not because I had achieved the God-given target but because I had spent very little time thinking about what chaplaincy in the Army was really like. I also felt a strange void in a personal sense too, because the goal was reached and I was left thinking "What now?"

The vast majority of soldiers are un-churched and, I believe, becoming less and less spiritually conscious. This has a positive – in that they may have no preconceptions, but it also has a negative – they are often cynical and resistant to the spiritual.

I'm a husband and a father and the older I get, the harder leaving my family behind gets. I remember telephoning my daughter from Afghanistan and when I put the phone down I wept for ages. I then spent a serious amount of time asking God about what I was doing and why – and these questions continue.

I was once told by a Methodist chaplain, "You don't do Army chaplaincy unless you cannot do anything else." And he was right. It is that unique, that challenging and that demanding. But It can also be rewarding.

Stephen on river patrol, Basra, 2005

Janice leading a Sunday Service for the ship's crew

Janice leading a Remembrance Day Service on board ship in the Caribbean, 2009

Janice Pettipher is the only female Methodist chaplain in the Royal Navy. In fact, she is one of the few female chaplains to the forces full stop. Janice worked in circuit for five years but, feeling called to military chaplaincy, she grabbed the opportunity to 'join up' and after seven gruelling weeks of training at Britannia Royal Naval College was commissioned in 2008. Since then Janice has been based at the Maritime Warfare School, HMS Collingwood, and at HM Naval Base Portsmouth where she is a small ships' chaplain, deploying for six to eight weeks at a time.

This job means you move on all the time and you meet so many people. It makes you focus on the time you have with them. And you have to trust that you were what those people needed you to be at the time. We have to let them go, just as Jesus did. Me leaving makes space for the Spirit, or someone else, to minster to that person.

Sometimes, because of the routine of the day on ship, you can think "Am I making a difference?" but if all we do is make the people we serve smile, and sometimes that is all we can do, then that's a good thing. If we ask "How are you?" and really mean it they know that we care.

We learn something new every single day – that's the joy.

When on board a ship, Janice's day, like all her other colleagues, is incredibly busy.

Life on board is non-stop and I fit in wherever I can. A typical day starts with my morning devotions at 6.30am and then the ship has 'Call the Hands' at 7.00am with breakfast from 7.00am to 7.45am. Then it's just one thing after another - pretend fires, floods and machinery breakdowns, which are all opportunities to make sure the ship's company are always ready for anything at any time. I always visit the bridge first to see where we are and chat to the duty watch. I visit a different mess deck every day at 10.00am for tea and a chat. I also visit office spaces in the same way – the engineering department, main communications office, the operations room and the flight deck with the helicopter crew. At the moment, I'm also teaching GCSE English to seven people and have homework to mark.

Just because she is a chaplain doesn't mean Janice avoids the discomfort associated with some of the simulated exercises.

Recently, the Marines were practising boarding a ship with hostile pirates onboard, with our ship pretending to be the pirated ship. I acted as one of the frightened pirates so I could be involved and, because they have to do everything exactly as they would for real, it was quite frightening. My arms really hurt from being tied behind my back and then used as handles for two of the Marines to haul me up like a sack of potatoes and dumped on the deck.

For Janice the job is a blissful privilege, partly because she is answering her call.

It's the first time I've ever done anything where I've been allowed – and this sounds crazy – to be totally, 100% me. I like to make decisions and get on and do things and in the Navy you have to make decisions and get moving. Another thing I love about the Navy is that everyone is accepted for who they are.

Some people have certain ideas about chaplains though. But just picking up your glass of wine and saying "cheers mate" is enough to change some people's perceptions!

Colin Weir has been a Methodist minister for eleven years and has spent almost seven of those as a Royal Air Force chaplain. Ordained into the Methodist Church in Ireland in 1999, Colin then served in South Donegal for four years. But a sense that God had other plans for him, coupled with an interest in the RAF, prompted Colin to apply for military chaplaincy.

Colin with a Chinook and mortar defence walls in the background, Afghanistan, 2009

When I decided to investigate RAF chaplaincy I found a very specific type of ministry. It is one that I believe still has the core Methodist roles of preaching and pastoral care, yet is completely different to circuit work in terms of the people you minister to.

In December 2002 I started my application process and was accepted in April 2003 after a series of interviews and tests. My chaplaincy training consisted of eight weeks at Royal Air Force College Cranwell, and during this time you learn about military life, how the RAF functions and what you need to do to survive in field conditions. It was a very physical course with lots of PT (physical training) and sleeping outside in cold and wet conditions, as well as the odd bit of 'square-bashing'! After graduation I went on to the Armed Forces Chaplaincy Centre where we learnt specifically about chaplaincy within the RAF.

So in August 2003 I started as a RAF chaplain. My first posting was to RAF Marham in Norfolk, which was a large station of around 3,000 personnel who look after four squadrons of Tornado jets. I served as part of a team of four chaplains, with two Anglicans and a Roman Catholic. In August 2005 I moved to RAF Leeming in North Yorkshire where I served as the only chaplain on a station of 1,800 personnel. Leeming was also a fast jet station with Tornados and Hawk jets. In July 2007 I moved to the Falkland Islands for 12 months. This was a fascinating tour and the year just flew by. I returned to the UK in July 2008 and have been based at RAF Odiham in Hampshire ever since.

Afghanistan, 2009

My daily life as a chaplain is very like that of a circuit minister, except instead of having a congregation to visit and provide pastoral care to, I have 1,600 RAF personnel and their families.

RAF Odiham is an extremely busy place and we have around 10 to 12 Chinooks operating in Afghanistan every single day of the year. That means that about 120 personnel are out there flying and looking after the aircraft, rotating around every 10 weeks. It's an intense routine and it places a burden on everyone and their families. So our chaplaincy has a big part to play in providing support to everyone at Odiham.

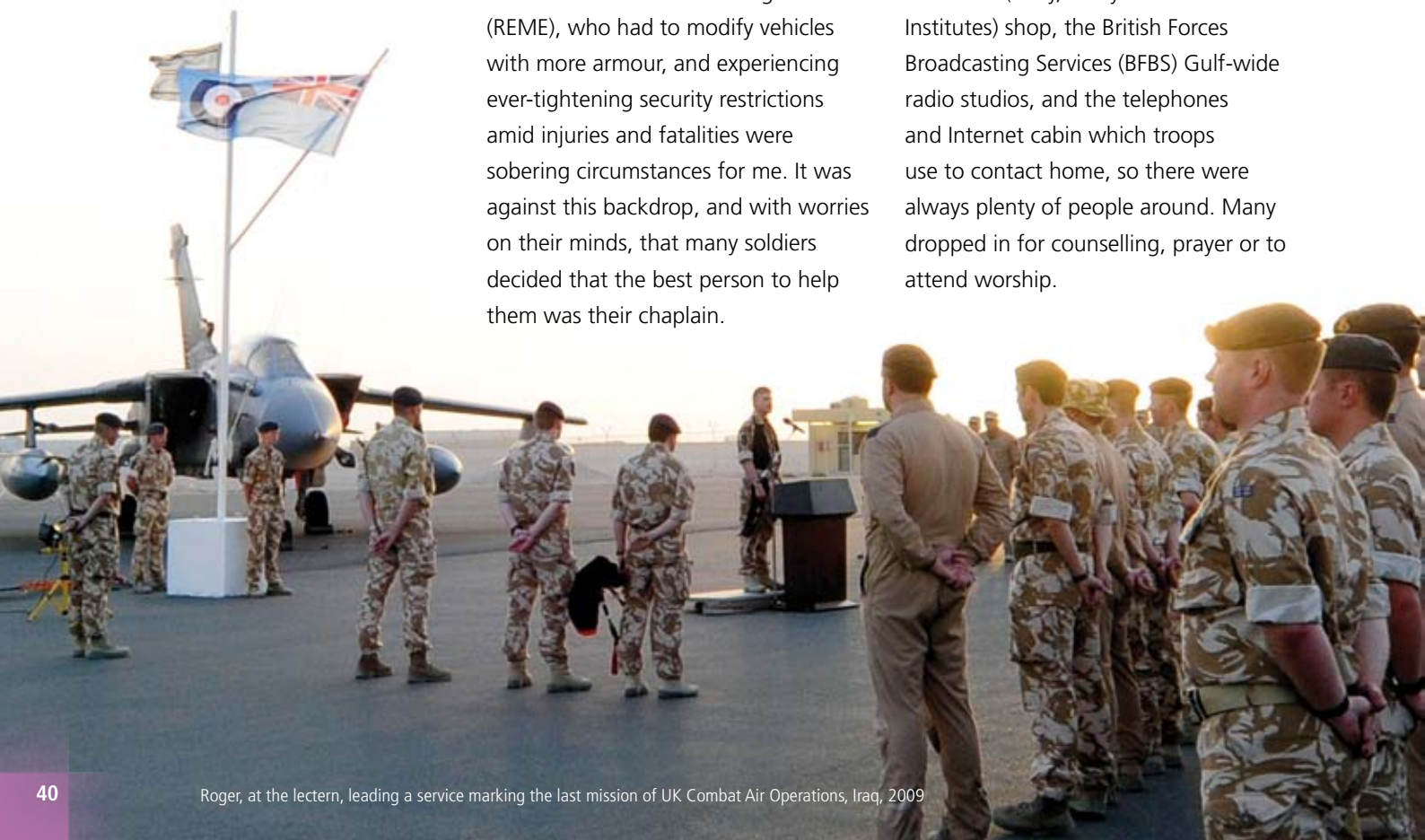
From March to July 2009 I was based at Kandahar Airfield, Afghanistan, looking after the Odiham personnel and the other RAF personnel there, about 900 in total. What keeps me going is a belief that this is what I am called to do and a real sense of being in the right place at the right time.

As an RAF chaplain

The Revd Roger Hardman served with the Army in Iraq from June to October 2004 and was posted to the biggest base British forces have there, at Shaibah, the site of a former RAF station which is south of Basra city. He was also chaplain to the British staff in Baghdad and at Iraq's port, Umm-Qasr. The RAF personnel in Qatar and Oman also received flying visits – so Roger flew a total of 13,000 miles over four months.

I conducted my ministry in a worsening security situation. Working with the Army's Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (REME), who had to modify vehicles with more armour, and experiencing ever-tightening security restrictions amid injuries and fatalities were sobering circumstances for me. It was against this backdrop, and with worries on their minds, that many soldiers decided that the best person to help them was their chaplain.

My church was a three-room Portakabin at Shaibah's 'welfare village'. It was alongside a coffee shop, the NAFFI (Navy, Army and Airforce Institutes) shop, the British Forces Broadcasting Services (BFBS) Gulf-wide radio studios, and the telephones and Internet cabin which troops use to contact home, so there were always plenty of people around. Many dropped in for counselling, prayer or to attend worship.



Roger, at the lectern, leading a service marking the last mission of UK Combat Air Operations, Iraq, 2009

As well as British troops there were those who had joined up from African or Caribbean countries, as well as many Fijians. It encouraged me to see that many of the troops turned to their faith in those desperate times. Several hundred Bibles were taken by troops during my time there from stacks I left at the entrance to the HQ.

To Roger, Baghdad seemed like another country compared with Shaibah. He recalls,

On my first night there the blast of a rocket aimed into the nearby green zone rocked the Portakabin where I slept. The level of insurgency in Baghdad reached devastating proportions in the months following. Our troops, along with the British civil servants working there, faced the daily threat of rockets and mortars in their workplaces and living accommodation, as well as the very high risk of roadside bombs, suicide vehicles, RPGs and ambush whenever we moved out of the green zone. Criminal gangs conducted kidnappings and car-jackings at an alarming rate and the murders of Iraqis who worked for the coalition or interim government were sadly all too frequent.

Roger says the harvest festival service he led while in Baghdad was about more than just thanksgiving.

It was about normalising the experience of our community in such difficult circumstances. Twenty minutes before the service three rockets hit the nearby Sheraton Hotel, which is used regularly by foreign journalists. It was the eighth time it had been hit. My text was Jesus' reassuring words from Matthew 6:25 where he says, "Do not worry about your life". That was the night that the news of Ken Bigley's death reached us. Many of those who had been close to, or involved in, incidents and those who had young troops under their care seemed particularly responsive to my presence there as a chaplain. When I look back on that time I can conclude, along with many others, that I was brought through those days by a strength that came from the Lord.

Visiting local communities, Basra, 2004

Roger, in fatigues, delivering school supplies, Iraq, 2004

Roger, centre, leading a harvest festival, Baghdad, 2004

With special thanks to:

The families of the chaplains whose diaries and papers were invaluable in creating a fascinating history of military chaplaincy in the 20th century:

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- Annette Conway and family
- Allan J Bowers
- Michael Humphries and family
- The family of Christopher Ross
- The family of John S Naylor
- The family of Robert J Rider

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Every possible effort has been made to contact the families of those chaplains whose diaries, pages and images have been used in this booklet. If a member of your family has featured unidentified in this booklet please get in touch with the Methodist Church so that we can caption accordingly for future reprints.

9 June 1944

I buried him close to the hedge near where he was killed. There was no possibility of doing otherwise. Being quite alone and reading the brief Order of Service over the grave affected me deeply.

Extract from The Revd Leslie Skinner's war diary, on the death of a Sherwood Ranger officer.

For a century and a half Methodists have been committed to serving the spiritual needs of the Armed Forces. These 150 years have seen chaplains accompany soldiers to the Imperial colonies of South Asia, minister to prisoners of war in Japan during the Second World War, provide pastoral care and support to troops based in Germany and Northern Ireland throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and serve on the front line with the men and women deployed to Afghanistan today.

Using diary extracts, first-hand accounts and personal photos this booklet gives an insight into the fascinating experiences of military chaplains - today and in the past - and celebrates their commitment and service. In their tenacity and deep-rooted concern for those they serve alongside, military chaplains work to echo John Wesley's aim to make all the world their parish.

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