

The Vintage Voice

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The Chaplain's Assistant

The Rev. Donald A. Stivers

The completion of my first year at Hobart College in January, 1943, was marked by a letter from the President of the United States. "Greetings," it began. The rest was an "invitation" to join the military. I felt it was more important to stay in school and complete my preparation for ordained ministry than to go off to war. My letter to the president of the local draft board was ignored. I learned later that he was not only an Episcopal priest and the retired president of Hobart but also a chaplain in the First World War.

I saw the dean of my college to tell him I was leaving. "You won't regret it," he said. "I missed out by not being in World War I. I have lacked an important connection with the men of my generation."

Resigned, I answered the call, deciding that, if I couldn't pursue ordained ministry, then the next best thing would be a military chaplain's assistant. I inquired about this possibility at the induction center but was told, "Wait until you are in your permanent outfit, and apply there." That outfit turned out to be the Field Artillery. I applied immediately upon arrival and several days later asked the battery clerk if the colonel had received my request. "Yes," he said. "He put it in file 13 — the wastepaper basket."

So the Field Artillery, not the Chaplain Corps, was to be my home for the next three years. First, I got through basic training, during which time I got to know the Rev. John Sears Baldwin, a Holy Cross monk. He reassured me I would find a way to serve the Lord. After basic training, I was made a battery clerk and sent on my way to Europe, equipped with a carbine and a Remington typewriter. A far cry from being a chaplain's assistant, I thought.

In reality, my ministry was well underway before I fully realized it. As battery clerk, I had access to the other soldiers' personal records. They began to tell me their personal problems. I became a sort of father confessor to the men. The first sergeant, who had found out that I wanted to become a priest, nicknamed me "Deacon."

Eventually, after a short time in Great Britain, we landed on Utah Beach in Normandy with our eight-inch field guns and began our "Grand Tour" of Europe — including such sights as the submarine pens of St. Malo, Brest, and Lorient. During this time the men really began to take my title "Deacon" seriously. It was, "Deac, I got a problem I need to talk to you about," or "Deac,

would you type a letter for me?” Also during this time, I had to type the daily “Morning Report.” Every time I typed “KIA” after a name, it meant a letter to a bereaved family.

Almost a year later we ended our tour at the Elbe River in Germany. We were preparing to be sent to the Far East when the war came to an abrupt end. We were assigned for the next several months to the 84th Division prior to our return home. I hadn’t been to the Eucharist since we left England. I put in a call to the division chaplain to ask for an Episcopal priest. He said, “I am an Episcopal chaplain. Come and see me.” So I met with Colonel (“The Padre”) Kenneth Sowers and told him of my plans to go to seminary.

It was Colonel Sowers who put the finishing touches on my “unofficial” chaplain’s training. First, he had a job for me. The general had ordered him to photograph the graves of the division dead, and he wanted me to assist in this solemn assignment. And so the next week I and several others boarded buses for the military cemeteries in Belgium and Holland. Second, he gave me this excellent advice, “Get in the habit of saying the Daily Offices. You will have to do it when you get to seminary.”

He was right. By the time I left seminary, the habit was very well ingrained. After praying the offices in community, I never felt alone when I read them. It was like joining countless voices praising God around the world. It was a great comfort in the loneliness that a newly ordained priest experiences after living for three years in a praying community. In retirement, praying the Daily Offices has kept me closely linked to our Lord and the members of his Body, the Church.

When I was ready to be discharged from the army I talked with someone who actually had been a chaplain’s assistant. “You must have gotten a lot of experience,” I said. “Are you kidding?” he replied. “All I did was type his sermons, play the field organ, drive his jeep, and polish his shoes. I didn’t do any ministry with the men.”

Father Baldwin, the Holy Cross monk, was right. I did find a way to serve the Lord and receive invaluable experience for ministry. Unlike the “real” chaplain’s assistant, I couldn’t play the organ, and I never learned to drive, but I did have a chance to be of help to the men. And I did have a connection with my generation that my college dean did not have with his. I was thankful for not becoming a chaplain’s assistant.



The Rev. Donald A. Stivers served parishes in the Dioceses of Rochester, Nevada, and Los Angeles. Father Stivers and his wife Florence celebrated fifty years of married life in 2010. They have two children (Margaret, who is a licensed architect and also a “wing walker” on a Stearman airplane, and Michael, who works for a computer firm) and three grandchildren.