

“Chapel Relationships – Support for Soldier Resilience”

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There is an attached photo – credit – “Virginia War Memorial Eternal Flame” Dr. Rebecca Powell 1987

This article describes the role that chaplains and chapels play in assisting Soldiers and Families in developing resiliency. In this, resiliency is seen itself as influenced by faith. The understanding of the influence as well as resiliency is founded on both psychology and theology. The article includes practical ideas that can be used in chapel settings to assist Soldiers and Families before, during, and after crises.

## “Chapel Relationships – Support for Soldier Resilience”

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February 1945 – *“God is watching over me, and I know everything will be alright.”*<sup>1</sup>

PFC Carter W. Anderson dictated these words to a fellow POW days before his death. The son of a Virginia farm family, Anderson’s letters home are testimonies to his love for his wife, his concern for his widowed mother, and his confidence in God. His letters from captivity describe dreams for his newborn son and relationships with his family. His hope and optimism appear even in circumstances of incomprehensible suffering.

Resiliency involves the capacity to think above the chaos of the day. It is not a denial of fear or danger but a capacity to respond to trouble with hope and action. Resiliency is a state of being – behaviors that emerge from attitudes.<sup>2</sup>

Years after the war, Anderson’s NCOIC wrote and described the resiliency that characterized his service and death. Of the battle, injury, and captivity he writes:

*“Carter was a brave man; he wasn’t afraid to die, but he certainly hated to give up the chance to see all of you again. .... He had the courage of two men in the way he fought the pain and tried to keep from being a burden.”*<sup>3</sup>

However, Anderson’s behavior of resilience does not suddenly appear in crisis. It was already evident in his life – visible to fellow soldiers. He is described as *“one of the most dependable men in the outfit.”*<sup>4</sup>

PFC Anderson is not an isolated case. Soldiers everyday serve “God and Country” while separated from home and family. We see in their lives that faith contributes to resiliency. Religious beliefs and practices can give the perspective and instruction to respond to tragedy.

### **However, if faith strengthens resiliency, what then can strengthen faith?**

In recent years, Clay and Carl have experienced of Basic Training as a crisis that has been transformed and enriched by a relationship with a chaplain.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Ben turned to the priest as he served and struggled during deployment. Daniel made it a priority, while at Landstuhl Hospital, to attend Chapel – he savored the hour and described the feeling of worshiping in a *“real building”* with Soldiers and Families.

Clay, Carl, Ben, and Daniel all have found their faith and their military service strengthened by relationships with other Soldiers and spiritual leaders. Their responses to struggle have been influenced by their faith and marked by their resilience. The Army Chaplaincy’s mission is to “provide spiritual, moral, and ethical leadership to The Army.” In the formal structure of the Army, the Chaplain Corps is called upon to

intentionally strengthen faith for the purpose of multiplying resiliency. As chaplains work with and on behalf of Soldiers, they find that Soldier strength is magnified by family and community strength. Likewise, Soldier struggles are amplified through broken personal relationships.

Thankfully, Army Families do often describe chapels and chaplains as important parts in celebrating and surviving military life. Sue, an adult Military BRAT, returned to the garrison of her childhood. Much was unrecognizable but a visit to the chapel sparked a flood of memories.<sup>6</sup> Decades later, she still has a sense of connection to her up her upbringing as the daughter of a Soldier through the faith that was offered in the chapel. Resiliency can be supported in children through “*lived experience, self learning, and role models.*”<sup>7</sup> Much of the programming of the chapel involves Religious Education and community interactions – all of which offer children the activities, lessons, and relationships to support resiliency during crises.

In 2008, Nina Cole completed a pioneering study of male expatriate spouses. While her study is of spouses relocating due to civilian careers, her findings include characteristic needs of both male and female spouses in times of high stress. For a sense of contentment and a demonstration of resilient behaviors, spouses need relational connections beyond the immediate family. Practical assistance in “settling in” is also important in relocations.<sup>8</sup> The relationships that Cole calls for can be found in the connections that can be found in chapel settings as relationships are forged over coffee and assistance is given to those in need.

Chapels and chaplains are noted as important parts of faith and resiliency, but only a small percentage of the Army population attends chapel or turns to a chaplain in times of crisis.

### **What can chaplains do to enhance their influence upon resiliency among Soldiers and their Families?**

Chaplains can best influence as they work at “*developing skills of interpretation.*”<sup>9</sup> The interpretative movement exists in understanding the theology of their own faith and the culture of the attendees whether this culture is that of the Army or that of the Soldiers’ homes.<sup>10</sup> In knowing both, chaplains can help Soldiers and Families in their resilience and in their faith.

Sue Patterson is a theologian who understands the international transitions that Soldiers face. As an adult, she has lived in the United States, England, New Zealand, and Ireland. Understanding the relationships that are needed in crisis, she emphasizes that “*The Church both participates in and represents... this incarnational reality... as the locus of Christ’s being and agency in the world.*”<sup>11</sup> Not only do chaplains have the opportunity to assist resiliency via relationships, but also the faith that they bring into those relationships is itself a spark for Soldiers’ resiliency. The content of the activity at the chapel directly communicates and influences both faith and resilience.

The chaplaincy's ministry of presence epitomizes an approach to strengthening resilience that uses worship, religious education, counselling and special events to train and prepare Soldiers for life and strengthen resilience. This ministry within all activities and all daily relationships is one that is called for by civilian theologians in an effort to train and prepare all people.<sup>12</sup> Theologian and ethicist, Stanley Hauerwas elevates this sort of ministry to a priority of highest importance in the life of all congregations.<sup>13</sup>

Most chaplains and even chapel attendees understand the importance of imparting faith and enhancing resiliency. However congregations (on-post and off) normally struggle to find and enact specific methods that can be implemented to achieve such an influence. While each person and each congregation is individual, there are ways to both increase the number of people strengthened in faith and resilience and the level to which they are influenced.

Analysis has been done to understand the influence that adults can have on adolescents in a multi-cultural, highly-mobile congregation such as a military chapel. The characteristics of positively influential congregations and individuals are rooted in a sense of trust. The concept of trustworthiness as intrinsic for positive influence is fleshed out through five categories which are:

- Significant Adults Enhance Worship Attendance
- Significant Adults Appear Trustworthy
- Trusted Adults Relate Intentionally
- Trusted Adults Continue Self-Development
- Multilayered Relationships Link Adolescents to Worship.<sup>14</sup>

Chapels have a great opportunity in times of crisis in offering care thus providing an enduring influence. This is not to say that it is appropriate to withhold relationship until there is a crisis, a perceived need. Rather the regular provision of care and connection is confirmed in the response and support in crisis. PFC Anderson's resilience in battle did not originate in Basic Training. It results from the support and faith from friends, family, and church. These preceding relationships continued through deployment and were supplemented by the connections that the Army allowed him to have with other Soldiers and civilians during service.

In the study on influence, it is clear that there are congregations that exist as positive factors in people's faith and resilience. However, it is also clear that there are individuals, and occasionally congregations that exist largely without being noticed by the people in their community. Unfortunately there are also those which exist and offer influence but offer essentially a negative role.<sup>15</sup>

No chaplain or congregation will ever be perfectly influential nor are errors automatically to doom the chaplaincy to play a negative role in Soldier resilience and faith. Chaplains can actively connect Soldiers and Families to their faith heritage for a unifying belief and relationship upon which people can stand even in their crises. Individual attitudes and despair are transfigured and the suffering of the moment is put into the perspective of God ancient and eternal presence.

Particular ideas and interventions have been identified as helpful demonstrating care and supporting resilience during extended periods of crisis. The most important care that can be given to a Family *during* crisis is to premeditate the possibility of crisis ahead of time. Like a school fire drill, knowing what might happen and thinking about ways to respond allows the actual crisis to be faced with minimal trauma. This premeditation includes learning about those who have faced the same and survived. The stories of faithful people, saints, of the past are a rich source for examples of this sort.

During crises, the simple act of appropriate hugging is significant in symbolizing and actualizing the supportive connections that exist. Similarly, permission to cry and express other emotions is important. Receiving appropriate touch and expressing deep angst, allow a resilient Soldier and Family to reach out to others – communicating and receiving messages of care. Further actions enhancing resilience are celebration of small successes, future thinking, identifying realities, and connecting the self-identity that existed before and after the crisis. Chaplains can integrate understandings of hope and thankfulness into their worship leadership and counselling.<sup>16</sup>

The idea that a chaplain or the gathered body of a chapel congregation could support and relationally enhance resiliency fits with the advice of the American Psychological Association. The APA's brochures on resilience emphasize reciprocal relationships as key elements needed for health in times of crisis. Not only do individuals need to receive support but also they are benefited themselves if they can offer care to others.<sup>17</sup> Theologian, James Loder similarly describes influential relationships as points of trust and guidance. This relationships as they exist prior to, during, and after times of crises are catalysts for change and development – an enduring resilience - in a person's life.<sup>18</sup>

Resiliency is dependent on relationships such as those available in chapels for influence and formation. *“Thought is not merely expressed in words; it comes into existence through them.”*<sup>19</sup> Prior to words, thoughts are jumbled masses of urges and undefined feelings. A key to enhancing resiliency and faith is in teaching people the words to express and give form to their thoughts. This guides Soldiers and Families to respond appropriately to stress and process their thoughts.

So counseling can be indicated to be a defining and systematizing of experience and feeling. Chaplains can assist Soldiers and Families in training their minds to separate and identify various feelings. This resiliency focused counseling corrects mis-education that is passed from generation to generation. Through the guidance of chaplains, Soldiers and Families can respond to crisis in ways use and further develop resilience. Chapel relationships can guide a person to retrain the mind into more complete inner strength and understanding which are a psychological foundation for resilience. This grounding is particularly true and needed in times when crises are so great that words cannot express the experience and strain.

Resilience is a key to surviving the perils of war and self-sacrifice. These perils and their accompanying stress are intrinsic to life in the Army. Soldiers and Families, as a variety of researchers agree, are able to be strengthened in faith and resiliency. The good news is

that the formal structure of the Army already provides support for resiliency development.

Representing the struggle that they have seen since birth, Military BRATs are already characterized as a population with resilience. In describing the positive results of being an Army Family, Mary Wertsch notes “*Resilience (or “adaptability,” “flexibility,” etc.). Military brats seem to be able to cope with almost anything...*”<sup>20</sup>

War and all crises can bring out the worst in people. However with relationships such as those found in the chapel and with chaplains, trauma can be faced with resiliency. By intentionally working to strengthen both faith and resilience, chaplains can assist greater numbers of Soldiers and Families to face the worst and repeat the resilient words from 1945:

“*God is watching over me, and I know everything will be alright.*”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Anderson, Carter W. (PFC), *Letter to his wife, Mrs. Lucy Crabtree Anderson*, mailed via Kriegsgefangenenpost from Stalag XIIA, February 1945.

<sup>2</sup> American Psychological Association, *Resilience in a Time of War*, Washington, DC, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Davis, Theodore, Letter to Mrs. Charles H. Anderson, Manchester, CT, August 10, 1948

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Names have been changed.

<sup>6</sup> Name has been changed. Clifton, Grace, “Making the Case for the BRAT (British Regiment Attached Traveller),” *British Education Research Journal*, Vol 1, No 3, June, 2004, p.458.

<sup>7</sup> Wertsch, Mary Edwards, “Strengthening Resiliency in Military Children: a Cultural Approach,” *The Good and the Grief Lectures*, Heidelberg Germany, USAG Baden-Wuerttemberg, March 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Cole, Nina, “What Kind of Assistance Do Male Expat Spouses Need?” *FIGT Conference Papers*, Families in Global Transition Conference, Houston, TX, March, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Hauerwas, Stanley, *Community of Character*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IL, 1981, p.74.

<sup>10</sup> Sedgwick, Peter, “Theology and Society,” *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, David Ford, ed. Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1997, p.716.

<sup>11</sup> Patterson, Sue, *Realist Christian Theology in a Postmodern Age*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, p.138.

<sup>12</sup> Jones, Gregory, et al, *God, Truth, and Witness: Engaging Stanley Hauerwas*, Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, 2005, p.70.

<sup>13</sup> Hauerwas, Stanley, *After Christendom*, Abingdon, Nashville, 1991, p.107.

<sup>14</sup> Powell, Rebecca, *A Friend Who Teaches Me*, PhD thesis, Bristol, England, University of Bristol, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Powell, Rebecca “Pretzel Moments in Suitcase Years,” *FIGT Conference Papers*, Houston, TX, March 2009.

<sup>17</sup> American Psychological Association, *Resilience in a Time of War*, Washington, DC, 2003.

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<sup>18</sup> Loder, James, *The Logic of the Spirit*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1998, pp.227-228, 245.

<sup>19</sup> Vygotsky, Lev, *Thought and Language*, (trans. E. Hanfmann), MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1962, p.125.

<sup>20</sup> Wertsch, Mary Edwards, *Military Brats: Legacies of Childhood Inside the Fortress*, Brightwell Publishers, St. Louis, MO, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> Anderson, Carter W. (PFC), *Letter to his wife, Mrs. Lucy Crabtree Anderson*, mailed via Kriegsgefangenenpost from Stalag XIII A, February 1945.