

# It Never Ends...

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When one makes a commitment to serve God - and in particular to serve God in and through the military organizations of our Nation - the opportunity to serve the men and women and families of our Armed Services never ends. We who are "Chaplains for Life" are only too aware of both the calling and the continued challenges.

I want to share this story with you because it was as much ministry to me as anything I had to do with the process.

It began in an airport on my way home from the Army Chief of Chaplains Strategic Leadership Training Conference. During a layover in Dallas, I spotted a tall, slender young man with a camouflaged backpack, U.S. Marine Corps issue. Since we were hanging out together in the same waiting area, I introduced myself and asked about his trip.



He had finished basic at Parris Island and was doing advanced training at Ft. Sill to become a Marine artilleryman. He was

in the airport because he was heading to California to be with his family. His brother, a Marine stationed on the West Coast, had sustained a head injury and was hospitalized.

I immediately figured he had some kind of accident during training. "No," he said, "his head was stomped on in a brawl in a parking lot where fellow Marines were saying farewell to some buddies, and a 'gang' jumped them as they headed to their cars."

His brother's head had been crushed, and he had been rushed to a medical center which specialized in brain injuries. He was in extremely critical condition. The hospital

was about 45 minutes from where we live. So the next day, my wife and I drove up there to check in with the family.

Fortunately, the hospital had a team of chaplains, including a retired Navy chaplain, who was very helpful in sharing information on the Marine's condition. The front desk, however, was unable to communicate anything since he was a V.O.V. "VOV?" I asked. "Victim of Violence."

Up the elevator and into the waiting room we went and met the mom, dad, and saw again the brother whom I met in the airport. Mom acknowledged that the first word she got was that her son would not recover and they were advised to pull the plug. "That was not an option," she said.

The room was filled with nearly a dozen fellow Marines, some who had been at the scene of the crime. They were hanging tough and together. They were great comfort to Mom, Dad, and the brother.

Upon leaving the hospital, I stopped off at the base chapel and shared some info with the RP on duty. He indicated that he would inform the appropriate chaplains and would be in touch. Within a day, I received a call from a chaplain who indicated they were on top of it.

For several days, I stayed in contact with the progress through the chaplains' office at the hospital and by cell phone with the mother. Then communication stopped. The word was that the Marine had died.

Arrangements for his memorial service were begun. The unit chaplain called me as to when it would be and extended an invitation to me to attend. Mom had not gone home. Dad was flying back with another brother, who is a civilian. Nancy and I drove up to Camp Pendleton from our home, exactly a one hour trip door-to-door.



photo by Petty Officer 3rd Class Torrey Lee

As we approached the chapel on a beautiful spring day, there were Marines standing at the entrance way in their battle dress. They were filing in a moment before the service began, without a place to sit.

The chapel was filled to capacity - my guess over four hundred in attendance. The space in the rear of the chapel and aisles along the sides were filled - standing room only. The service began with introductory remarks by the liturgist. Then a hymn was sung. There was quietness about the chapel... even though the chapel was filled, it was a time of reflection and mourning and pondering. Vibrant, vigorous Marines, mostly in the early twenties, were sober, somber and seriously reflecting on the moment.

The chaplain spoke from Ecclesiastes... the Wisdom of Solomon on the different times in our life... the time to mourn, to grieve... it was now. It was okay to recognize the tragic loss of a fellow Marine in a "peacetime" incident.

Two Marines stood to give us their seats in the back of the chapel. There was a hushed reverence in the chapel. Put 500 Marines together at one place and one time and hear a pin drop? So it was that day.

Then came the emotional ceremony of the Roll Call of the Sergeants of the Company. Three in a row answered, "Present, sir." When the fourth name was read, that of the deceased, there was silence, then TAPS. You can experience the emotion yourself just imagining this moment.

A hymn was sung... quietly. Then the chaplain invited all to express their sorrow to the family who was seated in the first row. Hundreds of Marines filed by, many embracing Mom, Dad, and brothers. It was a family occasion. Theirs was the physical expression of Semper Fi - always faithful - not only to our country, but to each other.

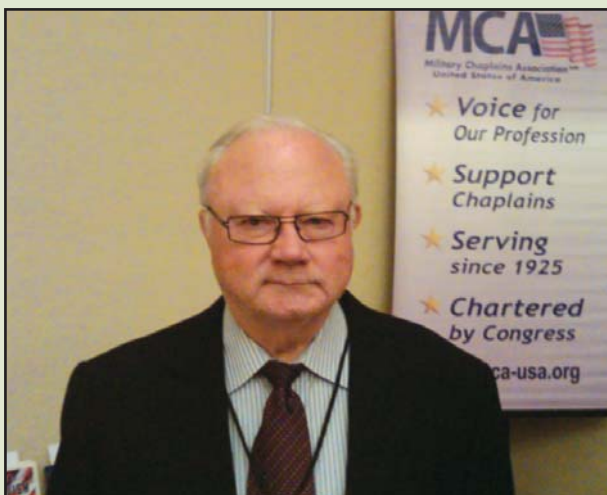
Mom, Dad, and brothers two, will never forget this moment. Their experience of the overt concern, care, and love of their son and brother will never be repeated except in the embedded memory of their hearts. A grateful nation was represented by several hundred young men and women who celebrated the tragic death of one of their own.

This death was not on the battlefield, nor even in training. This death was at the hands of men who have a vacuum in their lives which is empty of a commitment to something that is greater than themselves.

This is not the place to analyze the criminals, but the place to celebrate the victim's family and the Corps. No greater tribute could have been offered than was offered that day. To you Marines, who were there and participated, be proud of your involvement. It doesn't get any better.

From an old Soldier, I can offer no greater tribute to you than the powerful tribute that you demonstrated with such great affection –

Semper Fi.



*Chaplain Hoffmann in front of the MCA exhibit table at the recent Army Chaplain Regimental Association meeting in Denver, CO.*

*Names were not disclosed due to the ongoing investigation.*

## **The Military Chaplain**