

A Friendly Face in the Night

By SSgt. RICHARD FULTON

TAN SON NHUT AB, Vietnam (7AF)—Every Thursday night a U.S. Air Force captain can be found riding a jeep, checking the guards here.

In the back seat, resting between ammunition boxes and a shortwave radio, lie a flak vest (a padded vest worn to reduce shrapnel wounds) and rain gear.

His collar shows black cloth captain's insignia. From all indications Capt. James J. North Jr., is no different than any other security police officer.

But there is one difference — Capt. North is a chaplain. His weapon is friendliness and comfort for the men who watch and guard Tan Son Nhut at night.

During the day, Capt. North performs routine military chaplain duties. He leads worship services, conducts spiritual training classes, counsels anyone who requests it and, as the need arises, visits with the sick and injured in the base hospital. At the close of his busy day, the chaplain could leave his office, go to dinner and relax before going to bed. Some nights he does, but these times are rare.

Each Thursday night, Chaplain North reports to the 377th Security Police armory. Here he waits while the night crew is issued weapons, briefed by their supervisors, and driven to their posts.

He and the flight commander spend the next four or five hours driving along the 17-mile perimeter, stopping at each post to see how the men are doing.

Anytime the base is attacked, the chaplain goes immediately to security police headquarters to give whatever aid and comfort he can. He stays until the situation is back to normal — at least normal for a combat zone.

The men are glad to see the chaplain. His philosophy is "ministry by example." In visiting with the men, religion is not mentioned unless the men bring up the subject. Chaplain North asks each man if he is getting his mail and if everything is okay at home. If a man has a special problem that needs talking out, he will stay on the post, no matter where it is — a forty-foot high guard tower, machine gun bunker, or sentry dog patrol — and help the man.

In general, problems among the guards seem to be marital, moral or family ... similar to problems faced by military personnel in the United States. What multiplies and intensifies a man's problems and frustrates him is the fact that he is so far from home. What can be done immediately in the states, takes weeks in the Republic of Vietnam.

For example, one of the guards receives a letter from his wife in which she says, "I want a divorce."

Under these circumstances, a man's immediate reaction is, "Chaplain, I have to go home, see what the problem is and straighten things out."

Experience has taught the chaplain that this is not the best solution, and many times, not a solution at all.

Depending on the situation, one of many things may be done. The man is encouraged to telephone home. This is the most immediate step towards a solution.

If that proves unsatisfactory, the chaplain provides guidance to the man about what to write his wife. If the situation calls for it the chaplain writes either to the wife or to a minister or chaplain located near her, asking him to visit the wife.

In other problem areas, such as sickness or finance, Chaplain North advises the men to work closely with the Red Cross as the agency is geared to provide the most immediate aid.

One of the problems of security policemen is loneliness. Men who are out on post alone are subject to magnified anxieties, worries and depressions.

The chaplain brings cheer to the guards. A man engrossed in a personal problem or depressed can't concentrate on the job of watching; thus the chaplain's visits are important.

The chaplain said, "I don't quote texts to the men at night or anytime I am visiting with them. I simply try to communicate my own feeling of confidence and calmness in the dangerous situation we face. If they happen to ask me about life or death or how I feel about being in danger of incoming enemy rounds and the chance I might not return home, I tell them."

"Another of the things that I try to communicate to the troops in visiting them is that there are men — chaplains — who care enough about them individually to come and see them, no matter what the circumstances.



"As the men think about this, they will realize there is also a God who cares about them no matter where they are and no matter what the circumstances are."

He continued, "Some of these men know this and just accept it as a fact ... but a lot of men have no concrete philosophy about God and many doubt there is a God."

"I have never tried to prove there is a God. But I think by our compassionate way of relating man to man, these men can come to see there is a compassion that Christians have that must be communicated by some greater power and thereby awaken an interest in them."

Chaplain North arrived at Tan Son Nhut last October from an assignment at Amarillo AFB, Tex.

Amarillo AFB was his first Air Force assignment after coming on active duty in 1966.

Chaplain North was born in New York City in 1939 and grew up there.

A Seventh Day Adventist by denomination, he was educated in his church's school system. He received his bachelor of arts degree in theology in 1960 from Atlantic Union College, South Lancaster, Mass. He was awarded the bachelor of divinity degree in 1963 from Andrews University Theological Seminary, Berrien Springs, Mich.

Chaplain North became a second generation minister when, in 1963, he began his ministry in Portland, Ore. His father, Rev. James J. North, Jamaica, N.Y., was an active lay minister in the Church.

One of Chaplain North's interests is music, especially piano, organ, and choir direction. He has arranged and composed several pieces of spiritual music.

His wife is the former Miss Audrey C. Jones, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. John C. Jones, Brockton, Mass. The Norths

have three daughters — Stacey, Amanda and Alicia.

The chaplain was asked how he feels about war in general.

He answered, "From the standpoint of how man ought to relate himself to man, war is never desirable. As I understand and know God, he is not a God of war. He wants people to live in peace. However, all men do not care to be at peace with their fellow men. All men have sin and evil within them, and some allow these traits to dominate their lives and will not let others live in peace.

"So we live in a world where there is war simply because of the very nature of man.

"I see war in terms of a greater struggle of two forces at work in the universe . . . God and the devil, good and evil.

"I believe in a real God and a real devil," he said. "The devil's object is to destroy freedom, hurt and cause conflicts, ruin people's lives in any way possible, especially in terms of their coming to know God and Jesus Christ.

"God, on the other hand, wants to allow people to see how evil all of this is.

Chaplain North was asked what his favorite scripture in the Bible is.

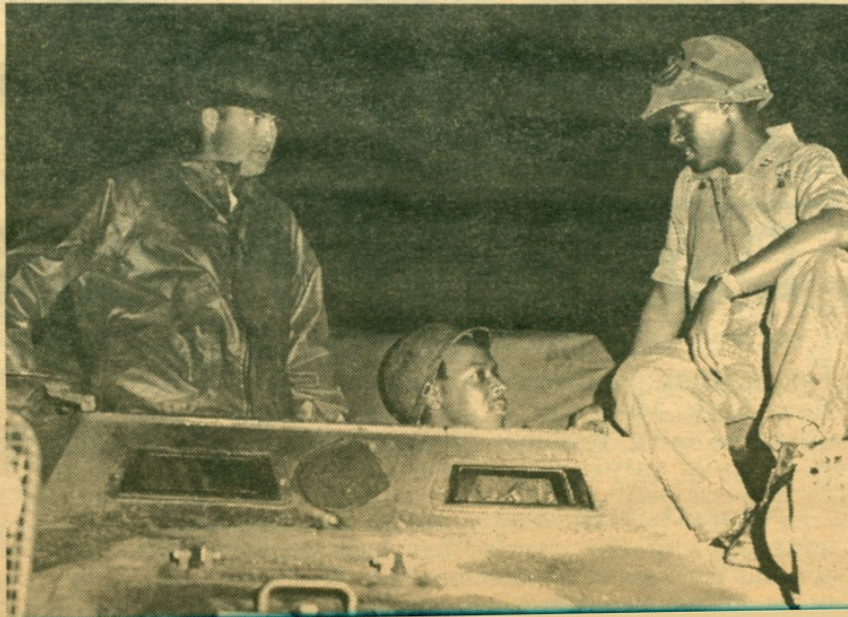
"That is a hard question to answer," he replied, "as I have so many favorites. I think here in Vietnam my favorite, or the one that means the most to me, is Psalm 46:1 — 'God is our refuge and strength, a very present

help in trouble,' now, this doesn't mean that every time we are in danger that God protects and saves us from that danger.

"It is my firm belief that when a man's life is in the hands of God, even though he should die the temporary death that all men die, in the resurrection day, he will be raised to live eternally.

One of his "perimeter congregation" had this comment: "The chaplain is a firm and constant friend, one I never hesitate in asking for help.

"Something else," he added jokingly, "I always know on post when it's Thursday night because here comes the chaplain!"



A welcome and well-known face around the guard perimeter of Tan Son Nhut AB in Vietnam is that of Chaplain James J. North Jr. Above, standing, left, he talks to a patrol; at left he steps in out of the rain into a perimeter bunker to chat with the men and below, right, he drops in on an armored personnel carrier. (USAF Photos by A1C Rick Mansfield)