

Saving Bodies and Souls: Army Chaplains and Medical Care in the First World War

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*Mr. God or M. Cinema for which does the chaplain stand? Does the soldier think of his Padre in the main as the representative of God, or chiefly as the provider of canteens, cinemas, and creature comforts?*¹

Between 1914 and 1918 men of all nationalities, abilities and faiths took up the call to war. In Britain, particularly in late 1914, the recruitment stations and military training facilities buckled under the weight of thousands of men swept along by a wave of patriotism. Most of these men saw this as an opportunity to fight, but some recognised a distinction between serving their country and taking up arms to fight. Amongst these volunteers came the religious men who would serve their country as non-combatant military chaplains. From 1796 to the present day, Army chaplains have played a role within the British military. The purview of the modern day chaplain, according to the British Army, is to ‘...provide spiritual support, pastoral care, and moral guidance to all, irrespective of religion or belief’.² This brief for the modern army chaplain remains relatively unchanged from that of his First World War compatriot. Yet it is clear that chaplains in the First World War did so much more. The reference to ‘Mr. God or M. Cinema’ in the quote that opened this article highlights the duality of the chaplain’s role and how chaplains were primarily perceived as the suppliers of religion or entertainment services and many cases often both. Postwar Reverend Geoffrey Gordon wrote this question as part of his reflective review of the place of the Army chaplain within the First World War. Within his published paper Gordon recalls with frustration as being referred to as both Mr. God and Mr. Cinema by soldiers and officers.³ This frustration illuminates the conflicting roles played by British Army chaplains during the First World War. Yet, it fails to consider a crucial third role, that of the chaplain within the medical services. Chaplains who served alongside medical units often assumed a complex and multifaceted role that blended their religious duties with a wide array of supportive and caring activities. Spiritual engagement with their fellow man often manifested as the holding of services and providing comfort for the dying, which many saw as the sole duty of the serving army chaplain. Yet many chaplains also saw fit to expand on their duties into a more active role which focused on delivering physical care. This more hands-on approach saw chaplains treating wounds, supporting soldiers and medical staff as well as scouring no-man’s land for

¹ Rev. T. W. Pym and Rev. G. Gordon, *Papers from Picardy, By Two Chaplains, the Rev. T. W. Pym and the Rev. Geoffrey Gordon*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1917,) pp.108-9.

² Anon, Royal Army Chaplains’ Department, army.mod.uk, Royal Army Chaplains’ Department, <http://www.army.mod.uk/chaplains/chaplains.aspx>, accessed 24/10/2015

³ Pym and Gordon, *Papers from Picardy*, pp.108-9.

the dead and wounded. There is little within the current historiography on this facet of a chaplain's role during the First World War; therefore, this paper seeks add to limited historiography by firstly exploring the spiritual role chaplains played and then considering how this evolved into performing other supportive tasks away from spiritual duties. Ultimately the question will be asked, to what extent did chaplains overstep their assigned role during First World War and what impact did this have on those around them?

Over the last two decades, Michael Snape and Edward Madigan have done much to raise attention to the role of chaplains within the First World War. Academics such as Seddon et al note until the late twentieth century historiography has generally viewed army chaplains negatively or simply not at all.⁴ Snape indicates that at the start of the war there were 97 full time Anglican chaplains. By the end of the war this had risen to 1,985.⁵ After the declaration of war in 1914, the British Military were entirely unprepared for the amount of volunteers who sought to enlist. Madigan argues that this was also particularly true of Army chaplains who prior to war were seen by military authorities as more of an unaffordable luxury.⁶ Ultimately this view would be overtaken by recognition of the role chaplains upon soldier's morale yet there was no particular drive to push chaplains to sign up. Instead many religious men volunteered and quickly found themselves granted the rank of "captain". These men were then given little training or guidance and dispersed throughout the army with many finding their way into base hospitals, aid stations and Casualty Clearance Stations.⁷ Both Snape and Madigan take care to outline the supportive and diverse role of the army chaplain within the war and within their accounts they question the place and purpose of faith at the front.

The work of Lynda Parker places the chaplain within the medical sphere of the First World War. In *The Armour of God* she considers the role of the chaplain in military hospitals and field ambulances. Parker demonstrates how chaplains who supported the medical services and staff were often rewarded with the Military Cross.⁸ Parker also argues that Anglican Army chaplains in the First World War would not particularly take the time to consider the implication of overstepping their mandate. The chaplain is presented here as man more focused on acting rather than reflecting. Mayhew, in *Wounded*, also

⁴ Rachel L. Seddon, Edgar Jones and Neil Greenberg, 'The Role of Chaplains in Maintaining the Psychological Health of Military Personnel: An Historical and Contemporary Perspective', *Military Medicine* 176, (2011), 1358.

⁵ Michael F. Snape and Richard Holmes, *The Royal Army Chaplains' Department, 1796-1953: Clergy under Fire (Studies in Modern British Religious History)* (Rochester, NY: The Boydell Press, 2007), p.183.

⁶ Edward Madigan, *Faith under Fire: Anglican Army Chaplains and the Great War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p.52.

⁷ *Ibid*, p.94

⁸ Linda Parker, *The Whole Armour of God, Anglican Army Chaplains in the Great War* (London, 2009), loc. 870-960, Kindle Edition.

devotes a short chapter, presented from the first person perspective, to the Army chaplain. Mayhew presents excellently the diverse role of chaplains from offering limited medical attention to aiding sanitation and morale through presiding over burials.⁹ There is much to praise in both Parker and Mayhew's accounts yet both are fairly short and there is a limited analysis of the impact of these roles had. This paper seeks to add to these considerations of chaplains by demonstrating how crucial the role of the chaplain at the front could be, particularly for the provision of spiritual and physical care. Whilst neither medics nor combatants, chaplains often found themselves in the thick of the action, particularly within the medical services and this paper will illustrate what impact their involvement had throughout the First World War.

Spiritual Care – ‘Will the padre, before this abominable war is over and his opportunity past, be able to establish his position as something more, as perhaps the minister and steward of God’s mysteries?’¹⁰

Morale and emotional support through spiritual guidance was considered to be an essential part of the chaplain's role at the front. Madigan argues that essentially the primary role of the chaplain was to offer comfort for the men.¹¹ Yet, the question often arose of how that comfort should be presented. Father Doyle's conviction that he must provide Confession and Holy Communion to the men soon advancing to the front was so strong that he cycled through a road under shell bombardment in order to perform these rites. He recalled:

I mounted the bicycle and faced the music. I don't want you to think me very brave and courageous, for I confess I felt horribly afraid; it was my baptism of fire, and one needs to grow accustomed to the sound of bursting shells.¹²

As many of the chaplains were stationed in medical centers or indeed directly attached to the RAMC services, spiritual comfort through religious services was a common experience for the wounded and convalescing soldier. This devotion to giving services was certainly not limited to the Roman Catholics. Rev. M. Linton Smith, Senior Chaplain to the Forces, recounted that he gave a service to over five hundred soldiers with over two

⁹ Emily Mayhew, *Wounded: From Battlefield to Blighty 1914-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁰ George A. Birmingham, *A Padre in France* (New York: George H. Doran, 1919), loc. 2420.

¹¹ Madigan, *Faith Under Fire*, pp.50-2.

¹² Alfred O'Rahilly, *Father William Doyle S.J.* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1932) loc. 4147, Electronic Edition.

hundred remaining to kneel and receive the 'Holy food'.¹³ He notes that afterwards many wounded men thanked him as they returned to the dressing station. He wrote:

it is on this desire for fellowship with God, deep hidden in many men, yet coming to the surface in the hour of their need, that we must rely, as the foundation on which to build up the religious life, in which fellowship with man plays so large a part.¹⁴

For these chaplains it seems that the practice of faith provided a means to offer comfort to the masses of soldiers facing the horrors of war. However, it is clear also that chaplains such as Linton Smith began to experience their roles not simply as individual chaplains but as ambassadors of their faith seeking to return men to their churches both during and after the war was won.

There is evidence to support that religious revivals among soldiers did actually occur during the war years.¹⁵ As is argued by Callum Brown, the rekindling interest in the church was a successful endeavor of many chaplains at least during the war as many soldiers engaged with religious services during their time at the front.¹⁶ However both Brown and Madigan argue that whilst the popularity of the chaplains may certainly have increased throughout the war, this did not translate to further adherence to the church post war.¹⁷ Allison supports this argument; however, he also suggests that a lack of post war increase in the church attendance was not because of any anti-religious sentiment expressed within the war but because of the high levels of mortality.¹⁸ A factor that John Wolfe estimates significantly depleted the devote attendees of churches.¹⁹ With reflection, it seems that Linton Smith's hope to rekindle religious attendance through wartime was short lived.

Still unsurprisingly many chaplains regarded religious ceremony as an important if not primary facet of their role in the war. Yet, others did not; Ernest Crosse, Chaplain to the 7th/8th Battalion of the Devonshires admitted in his diary that he not given a service for weeks aside from hurried personal prayers and burials.²⁰ Mayhew uses this passage to argue that, for many chaplains, religious duties fell away as they were faced with wounded and exhausted soldiers. She quotes Crosse as he refers to a fellow chaplain attached to a field

¹³ Rev. M. Linton Smith, 'Fellowship in the Church' in Frederick Macnutt (ed.), *The Church in the Furnace Essays by Seventeen Temporary Church of England Chaplains on Active Service in France and Flanders* (London: Macmillan, 1919), p.126.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Michael Snape, *God and the British Soldier: Religion and the British Army in the First and Second World Wars*, (London: Routledge, 2005), p.245.

¹⁶ Callum. G. Brown, *Religion and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Harlow: Longman, 2006), p.94.

¹⁷ Madigan, p.170.

¹⁸ Neil Allison, 'Free Church Revivalism in the British Army during the First World War' in M. Snape and E. Madigan (ed.), *The Clergy in Khaki*, (Surrey, 2003), p.54.

¹⁹ J. Wolfe, *God and Greater Britain: Religion and National Life in Britain and Ireland, 1843-1945* (London and New York, Routledge, 1994), p.78-82.

²⁰ Mayhew, *Wounded*, loc. 206.

ambulance who had reportedly gone months without any 'religious work' and instead had devoted his time to working with the walking wounded and the organisation of the mobile aid station between deployments.²¹ It is clear that for some chaplains, traditional endeavors of spiritual comfort were impractical or less important than physical action, yet this did not detract from their religious focus. Crosse again reiterated that his faith remained at the root of his actions despite lacking the time to deliver a sermon when he writes that his stretcher bearing blistered palms were '...worthy hands to hold a Bible and make the sign of the Cross'.²²

Within his diary Rev. Creighton presents his inner conflict about his struggle to give services while running a canteen. He writes 'Men do not want to think or learn. They are weary, sodden, patient, hungry, cheerful, good-natured animals.'²³ Creighton presents a mix of both pride, for the canteen that served the physical needs of the men, and exasperation at their disinterest in his teachings. Creighton, like so many other serving men of faith, internally questioned his true purpose at the front, taking solace from his ability to still provide comfort, despite a lackluster response to his more religious orientated efforts. It is this frustration and attempts to justify their presence at the front that which makes chaplains so different from men with which they served. The unique nature of the First World War having encouraged so many of them to join the military yielded meant that there were more than ever previously in service and yet their role was distinctly unclear. Essentially each chaplain serving at the front was ultimately faced with the personal question of what his role actually was and how he would serve. This gave him a level of autonomy that almost no other serving man could have within the First World War. Post-war this debate was succinctly incorporated into the writings of Rev. Studdert-Kennedy who argued that chaplains served within the war not to particularly give services but simply to offer religious rites and teaching alongside any other means of providing comfort.

This is the first of the things that every chaplain knows—that he is wanted, badly wanted, as a priest; even though he be unfortunate enough to be merely "tolerated" as a man. He knows too—though it is hard to put the knowledge into words—exactly what it is he is wanted for. He knows he is indispensable, because he is the one representative of peace in an atmosphere of strife. To him men turn, as by instinct, for an antidote against strain, friction, weariness and depression.²⁴

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Oswin Creighton, *Letters of Oswin Creighton, C. F., 1883-1918* (London: Hard Press Publishing, 1923), loc. 3641, Electronic Edition.

²⁴ Rev. G. A. Studdert-Kennedy, "The religious difficulties of the Private soldier' in Macnutt, Frederick, (ed.) *The Church in the Furnace Essays by Seventeen Temporary Church of England Chaplains on Active Service in France and Flanders* (London: Macmillan, 1918), p.414.

For Studdert-Kennedy chaplains were a beacon of hope and support within the confines of the First World War. Spiritualism was important but so was recognition that services were not the only means to serve the Army, the soldiers and God.

Spiritualism was a crucial part of a chaplain's role when caring for the dying. In fact, their supportive presence as men died was one of their most difficult but vital roles within the Army Medical Services. Philip Thomas Byard (Tubby) Clayton, founder of the infamous Talbot House soldiers rest house in Belgium, dealt with death the moment he first arrived at the Front. He noted in his memoirs that during the directionless first months that so many chaplains faced upon entering the war, the only other function aside from leading prayer was the visiting of those on the daily D.I. (Dangerously Ill) list.²⁵ Close to death and suffering, a soldier's needs ranged from a smoke or a drink, to final letters home or attempts at absolution and spiritual comfort. Father Doyle frequently found himself giving spiritual relief for the dying.

'Ah, Father, is that you? Thanks be to God for His goodness in sending you; my heart was sore to die without the priest. Father—the voice was weak and came in gasps—Father, oh, I am glad now, I always tried to live a good life, it makes death so easy.' The Rites of the Church were quickly administered though it was hard to find a sound spot on that poor smashed face for the Holy Oils, and my hands were covered with his blood. The moaning stopped; I have noticed that a score of times, as if the very touch of the anointing brought relief.²⁶

Some men, desperate not to die alone, clung to the passing padre who had more time than any other member of the medical staff to stay with the wounded and sick. Presbyterian chaplain Watt recounts the bravery of a young lad who needed a hand held for support to bear the pain 'Hold my hand padre " begged one fine fellow, and try to bear it till the doctor comes around'.²⁷ This blurring of the role of the chaplain within the medical facilities is particularly obvious within these examples of men clinging to the chaplain. The multifaceted nature of their needs from sustenance to attention shows how each soldier could approach their moment with the chaplain in a unique way which demanded an equally unique response which combined spirituality with physical forms of comfort. Unlike the medical staff, who could ill afford the time to offer bespoke care, chaplains could take the time to meet the individual needs of wounded men and fulfil an element of the caring process that overburdened medical staff could not. Such is the case as with one soldier who amidst the pain of his injuries earnestly told chaplain Watt that he was going home just

²⁵ P. B. Clayton, *Plain Tales from Flanders* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1929), loc. 101, Electronic Edition.

²⁶ O'Rahilly, *Father William Doyle S.J.*, loc. 5279

²⁷ Lauchlan MacLean Watt, *In France and Flanders with the Fighting Men* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1917), loc. 222.

before he died.²⁸ In this example it was neither a drink nor absolution but the company of a kind man willing to listen to a dying young soldier's delusions which provided comfort. Chaplains continually had to be flexible within their role as they incorporated their traditional spiritual duties into the more direct physically caring roles that they increasingly undertook. This balancing of physical care and spiritual reassurance was often as unique as it was essential as each chaplain utilised their own undirected personal approach to sooth men's fears, consciences and souls. Simply, chaplains were welcome because they had the time, patience and often the experience to be with the suffering and dying.

However, not always was their presence welcome. Chaplain George Birmingham recalls as he first approached his new post within an emergency stretcher bearers camp that he was told "We don't want no — parsons here".²⁹ This sentiment was repeated to him several times in the same day concluding with his sergeant-major (commanding officer) deciding at first glance that he was an 'inefficient simpleton'. This first meeting is similar to the reception faced by many chaplains upon arrival at their new posting. Without a weapon or official purpose beyond hymns and prayers questions rose about the use of such a man within a warzone. However, Mayhew indicates that others had a more positive experience as some regimental medical officers gratefully greeted some chaplains and immediately assigned them tasks.³⁰ Cyril Horsley-Smith was one such chaplain who was put to work in the hospital upon arrival. Serving with the with the London Regiment Horsley-Smith however differed in his approach to the role to other chaplains.³¹ Certain that his role was more spiritual he was reluctant to take on additional duties outside of the chaplaincy yet he took great pains to offer care for the dying regardless of his hated of his surroundings. Balancing his desire to avoid contact with staff but still carry out his role Horsley-Smith would creep from bed to bed at night in the ward and deduce from the temperature of the sleeping man's nose if he was close to death. Those with the coldest noses he would pray over and write to their family to prepare them. This somewhat strange method of diagnosis was usually accurate but not always well received. This is evident in the account of the silent chaplain waking a patient within his hand on his nose who began to swear and curse at the chaplain. Shouting loudly 'this bugger says I'm going to die' the agitated soldier quickly sank back and while glaring at the padre promptly died.³²

Horsley-Smith is important as he represents the chaplains who was determined to do his duty but choose to limit himself to his assigned tasks. It is unfair to argue from the evidence available that Horsley-Smith cared less or gave less attention than his fellow

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Birmingham, *A Padre in France*, loc. 1762

³⁰ Mayhew, *Wounded*, loc. 2027

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Mayhew, Loc.2328.

chaplains. Indeed he received a letter from a convalescing soldier at the end of the war which thanked him profusely for the attention he had shown whilst the man was in hospital.³³ However, it can be recognised that how a chaplain decided to employ his time within the war was very often an individual one.

For Horsley-Smith it was equally important to provide comfort for the families of the wounded and dying through correspondence, an act for which he also received praise.³⁴ It is clear that the popularity of the chaplain with his fellow soldiers can be seen to be linked to his actions. Indeed, within Brophy and Partridge's compendium of soldier's slang and song, the definition of 'Padre' indicates how the popularity of the chaplain depended how they conducted themselves.

A chaplain had few definite duties; he could make himself useful or he could slack. In general, it may be said that all Roman Catholic padres were respected, because they came into the line and because they lacked the haw –haw voice. Church of England and Non-conformist padres were popularly divided into three classes: (1) the man of the world who swore and over drank – he was despised and disliked; (2) the earnest but ineffectual; despised but tolerated; (3) the spiritual but determined, who made himself useful as a first aid man and distributor of cigarettes. Chaplains were respected when they showed courage under fire and some for their moral and spiritual qualities.³⁵

From this account it is clear that chaplains were judged on the basis of their actions and importantly how useful they were to their fellow soldier. It is striking the most popular view of the chaplain is the one who provides comfort and medical care. Stripped of class or rank, if the chaplain was both useful and served a purpose within a medical context he was considered to be a respected and important part of the team. However, this is not to say that their spirituality was not part of that process as is apparent from the last line of Brophy and Partridge's description which blends together spiritual qualities with bravery as the ideal portrayal of the popular army chaplain during the First World War.

Physical Care – 'being very anxious to be on the spot...'³⁶

Thomas Pym, a Church of England army chaplain, was clear to separate the soldier from the chaplain in his post-war memoirs. Pym very much saw himself as part of the army and one of the men. His memoirs are full of references to 'us' and 'we' when discussing activity at

³³ *Ibid*, Loc. 2316.

³⁴ *Ibid*.

³⁵ John Brophy and Eric Partridge, *The Long Trail; Soldiers' Songs and Slang, 1914-18* (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1972), p.130.

³⁶ Rev. E. V. Tanner, *Private Papers IWM*, Documents 22718, p. 17.

the dressing stations or enduring bombardment.³⁷ Yet he also notes the quandary he attributes to every chaplain, in simply what exactly should they be doing?

The soldier is sent, under clear orders, to a trench, and he must hold it till he is relieved. He has no doubt as to what it is his duty to do. In times of emergency the chaplain can refer to no superior and he has no orders. Each moment he must choose for himself between conflicting claims, resisting alike the temptation to do conspicuous things simply because they are conspicuous, and the other temptation to stay too far behind when his friends and companions are in the place of danger.³⁸

Is it within Pym's writing that the individual dilemma for every serving army chaplain in the First World War becomes apparent. Dissatisfied with only providing religious services and hand-holding, some chaplains chose to do whatever they could to their fellow men. Importantly this determination more often than not meant engaging in medical roles at the front. Rev. E. V. Tanner was one of these men and he explains in his memoirs how he had to negotiate to allow him to aid the medical teams.

February 27th (Tues) February 28th (Wed) the raid was planned to take place tonight (Feb. 27). Being very anxious to be on the spot, I went up the line in the morning with Hopkins and his Bombing party under Sarge. Abbott. A certain amount of stuff, chiefly shrapnel, was coming over when we got there. I went straight to the aid post and persuaded Maguire to let me stay there for the night and help the stretcher bearers.³⁹

Unlike soldiers who would be arbitrarily assigned the demanding role of stretcher bearer when required as a chaplain Tanner could not be ordered to assist yet his presence presented an issue of safety. His determination to be useful clashed with the established role of the chaplain which was traditionally to be practiced behind the front line. Church of Scotland Presbyterian army chaplain Lauchlan Maclean Watt, also keen to overstep his "role", turned his attention to assisting the over-burdened medical staff, much to the amusement of the patients in the field hospital.

³⁷ *Ibid.* loc, 1576.

³⁸ Rev. T.W. Pym and the Rev. Geoffrey Gordon, *Papers from Picardy Electronic Edition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1917), loc. 2.

³⁹ Tanner, *Ibid.*

For example, one day in a tent I found the orderlies so busy that some of the patients were trying to shave themselves, and they were not finding it an easy task. So, as I saw blood streaming down the cheek of one wounded fellow I essayed to finish the job, which I did without scars. The blood of a brave man is too precious at present to be lightly flung away... While I was shaving one poor lad, who could scarcely breathe, he gasped, with a smile, " This would make a fine thing for the papers, or the Movies." And a Scottish boy said, " I'll tell oor man when I get hame. I ne'er was shaved by a Parish Minister afore, and I dinna expect to be again." It brought a touch of variety into their life.⁴⁰

For chaplains such as Wentworth and Watt, dealing with the wounded soldier was not limited to a sympathetic ear or a drink for the suffering man, but required them to physically participate in care. Yet, chaplains getting their hands dirty with medical or physical tasks was not unique. Charles Doudney was a chaplain fourth class who was attached to the 18th Brigade 6th Division who brought to the role a wealth of medical experience. Prior to the war, Doudney had served as a chaplain in South Australia in remote locations which led him to act in many roles including local religious leader, mediator and medic. Indeed, on his first day to his new parish in Australia Doudney assessed several patients including a lad with a broken leg and a women going into labour.⁴¹ Doudney, like so many other chaplains brought these skills and enthusiasm to his role in the First World War and relished in finding ways to care for soldiers above and beyond his traditional remit which eventually included him moonlighting as the resident radiographer along with his regular duties.⁴²

Yet this focus of care was not limited solely to the wounded and sick. Doudney was also renowned for keeping a keen eye on the physical state of the medical staff, often advising overtired staff to rest or taking over less taxing medical duties, such as bandaging, to encourage respite.⁴³ As Mayhew argues the medical staff came to trust these chaplains' implicit ability to recognise the over-worked, nurse, orderly, or surgeon desperately in need of rest.⁴⁴ In reality, chaplains had neither the right nor the official expertise to make such judgements. Similar to doctors, chaplains usually held the nominal rank of Captain, making them officers with the right to issue commands. Yet, in much the same way that Sutphen argues that non-combatant doctors struggled to attain the respect their rank deserved from

⁴⁰ Watt, loc. 912.

⁴¹ J. Horne, (ed.) *The Diaries and Memoirs of the Rev. Charles Edmund Doudney, M, A., C.F. (1871 – 1915)*, (UK, Jonathan Horne Publications, 1995), p.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Mayhew, *Wounded*, loc. 2143

other soldiers, chaplains would also infrequently give commands for similar reasons.⁴⁵ Regardless, medical staff did listen and allow themselves to be guided by the vigilant chaplain if not directly ordered. Chaplains such as the Reverend Mellish took the role of caring for the medical staff very seriously. Mellish was renowned for frequently going out to the front to bring a flask of tea, shielded from mud and shells by his hands, to weary stretcher bearers.⁴⁶ These accounts are just a few of many examples where chaplains of all denominations voluntarily took on responsibility for the physical care of not just the wounded but also more widely for those around them without explicit orders or spiritual guidance.

Whilst there is a significant amount of evidence and historiography of men overstepping their established roles and undertaking more hazardous or complex duties at the front and in hospitals, there is little to consider why chaplains felt they had the right or the requirement to do so.

As noted chaplain Pym argued that each chaplain must choose for himself what role he would undertake in the war.⁴⁷ To reiterate, Pym regarded the role of the chaplain to be fluid and claimed that ‘...In times of emergency the chaplain can refer to no superior and he has no orders.’⁴⁸ In 1919 Charles Plater published his *Catholic Soldiers* report which claimed that medical staff came to view Catholic chaplains as an essential part of their team.⁴⁹ Within the report an unnamed Catholic Chaplain corroborates this by claiming ‘how many times I have said “I’m a Catholic priest”. “Oh Father, I’m so glad you have come.” This so noticeable that doctors in my field ambulance, who at first thought me a hindrance, soon looked on me as a help.’⁵⁰ Plater’s report has drawn heavy criticism for over emphasising the role of catholic chaplains at the front by ignoring the high degrees of animosity towards the chaplains that Snape and Madigan argue were apparent, especially between the ranks.⁵¹ Yet, it is clear that chaplains were accepted by many and allowed to participate. In his essay *The Soldiers Religion* Reverend Philip C. T. Crick, senior chaplain to the Forces in 1918, argues that chaplains sought acceptance at the front and that the best way to serve was not to be considered a “padre” but one of the men.⁵² He claimed that attitudes towards the “padre” had changed as a consequence of their action rather than their preaching or

⁴⁵ Molly Sutphen, ‘Striving to be separate’ in R. Cooter et al, *War, Medicine and Modernity* (Thrupp: Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1998), pp.48-64.

⁴⁶ Mayhew, *Wounded*, loc. 2027

⁴⁷ Pym and Gordon, *Papers from Picardy*, loc.2.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Charles Plater, *Catholic Soldiers*, (London, 1919).

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p.107.

⁵¹ Snape and Madigan, *Royal Army Chaplains’ Department*, p.12.

⁵² Philip C. T. Crick, ‘The Soldiers Religion’ in Frederick Macnutt, *The Church in the Furnace Essays by Seventeen Temporary Church of England Chaplains on Active Service in France and Flanders* (London: Macmillan, 1918), p.359.

strength of faith. He wrote that feelings ‘...changed so often into a real affection for the man who had been with them in the trenches and possibly pulled them in from No Man’s Land when they were wounded...’⁵³ During the battle of the Marne in 1914 Reverend Watkins joined the stretcher-bearers in removing the wounded from the battlefield and formed a temporary dressing station due to the high numbers of casualties.⁵⁴ Father Doyle in April 1916 also displayed bravery as he ventured out during a gas attack for fear of his flock dying alone, without masks or absolution.

...it is evident many of the men despised the ‘old German gas,’ some did not bother putting on their helmets, others had torn theirs, and others like myself had thrown them aside or lost them. From early morning till late at night I worked my way from trench to trench single handed the first day, with three regiments to look after, and could get no help. Many men died before I could reach them; others seemed just to live till I anointed them, and were gone before I passed back.⁵⁵

The actions of these chaplains demonstrated their commitment to the idea that their role in First World War was not simply one of giving spiritual care through sermons or even assisting behind the lines but required them to step beyond the lines and into the fray. For these men the reward tended to come from acceptance from the soldiers they served with. This affection for the chaplain is reflected in the concerns shown for Minister Watt during his time with the Gordon Highlanders in the 7th Division. When a rogue shell exploded, the smoke cleared and a voice called out with worry ‘Where’s the Minister?’ These acts of kindness and bravery served as precious moments to some soldiers such as the young wounded lad who clutched at Father Doyle’s hands and cried ‘Oh! Father I can die happy now, sure I’m not afraid of death or anything else since I have seen you.’⁵⁶ Ultimately, Gary Sheffield surmises that ‘the most effective padres were those that allied courage and paternalism with the ability to overcome the barriers of rank and class.’⁵⁷ It here that Pym’s argument about the purpose of the chaplain becomes the most clear. Simply, the more a chaplain moved beyond his role and put himself at risk for others, seemingly the more he was accepted, respected and valued, not simply as a man of faith but as a comrade in service.

Whilst removed somewhat from their role within the Medical Service is it important to consider burials as part of an essentially role particularly as the balance between risk and

⁵³ *ibid.*

⁵⁴ Owen Spencer Watkins, *With French and Flanders Being the Experience of a Chaplain Attached to a Field Ambulance* (London: C. H. Kelly, 1916), p.62, Electronic Edition.

⁵⁵ O’Rahilly, *Father William Doyle S.J.*, loc, 4405.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* loc. 4418

⁵⁷ Gary Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches: Officer-man Relations, Morale and Discipline in the British Army in the Era of the First World War (Studies in Military and Strategic History)*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p.97.

contribution is so apparent. Bishop Frank Russell Barry served as a Church of England army chaplain early into his ecclesiastic career. He notes that prior to the First World War burial was the primary task of chaplains. 'A colonel would say 'No work for you today, padre,' meaning by that, no corpses for burial'.⁵⁸ Barry explains that while the role evolved significantly as a result of the First World War and chaplains experienced more freedom to venture up to the line and take on a plethora of responsibilities, yet burial remained a fundamental part of the role for the purpose of sanitation and morale.⁵⁹

During the First World War, the collection and burial of the fallen was a dangerous task and included the assistance of anyone from the Corps Burial Officer to a regular soldier given burial duties.⁶⁰ Often this list included medical personal and sometimes chaplains. Rev. Winnifrith was renowned for forsaking his own safety while focusing on giving his attention to the men around him as his friend and colleague, Rev. Watkins noted at length in his own memoirs.⁶¹ Both men frequently trawled the battlefield in twilight to recover the dead or give aid to any overlooked wounded. They both recall similar burials during the battle of the Marne where Winnifrith describes 'bullets whistled about us; but I went on with the prayers...'⁶² Watkins expands on the same burial plot and discusses the importance of conducting burials after dark as imparted to him by Captain Brown at the grave side, 'Bullets have been falling around the house like hail; half an hour ago you couldn't have got to you.'⁶³ At another graveside at Ypres, Watkins remembers having to bury men whilst staying vigilant for an enemy sniper.⁶⁴ Yet, in both accounts, neither chaplain discusses fear or their own plight, but notes their 'sad task' as being never ending.⁶⁵ In burial duty the dual role of the physically caring and the spiritually protective chaplain reached its pinnacle. Certainly the disposal of bodies was a sanitation and morale issue for the majority of men at the front; however, for chaplains the collection and respecting of the dead to rest went beyond simply being a part of their assigned mandate. Accounts such as those of Watkins and Winnifrith indicate the stoic resolve which chaplains employed while attempting to provide peace for those they interred despite the risk to their personal safety. Sometimes this determination would come with the highest price. Anglican chaplain Oswin Creighton's reward for this bravery and ultimate sacrifice was the respect of his fellow soldier. In Creighton's

⁵⁸ F. R. Barry, *Period of my Life*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1970), p.60.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Peter E. Hodgkinson, 'Clearing the Dead.' *Journal of the Centre for First World War Studies* 3.1 (2007), 33-60.

⁶¹ Watkins, *With French and Flanders*, loc. 1523.

⁶² Douglas P. Winnifrith, *The Church in the Fighting Line with General Smith-Dorrien at the Front, Being the Experiences of a Chaplain* (London: Kessinger Publishing, 1915), loc. 1407, Electronic Edition.

⁶³ Watkins, *With French and Flanders*, loc. 1523.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

commanding officer's letter to his family, he was offered the highest praise a military man could muster: respect for Creighton's courage and dedication to duty.

He had been with us over eighteen months, and all ranks were much attached to him. With his strong personality, courage, and good spirits, he was an example for us all. He worked indefatigably for the men, and no day was too long, or trouble too great, when their comfort was concerned. His charm of manner was very great, and he was a man of deeds not words. He was fearless of death, and I am sure the death was such as he would have chosen." His desire had been to be always amongst his men, and he was buried as he would have wished between two of them in the little military cemetery at Cheques.⁶⁶

It is ultimately clear that the provision of physical care and comfort rather than purely spiritual support often came with the highest price of putting unarmed men of faith directly in the sights of the enemy. Yet, this failed to act as a deterrent for many chaplains, whose determination to part of the team and muck in with their fellow soldier often overrode their personal safety as well as their official mandate as a chaplain serving in the First World War. It is here that the multifaceted role of the chaplain becomes most evident. Refusing to be content with giving services or even staying in hospitals, many chaplains actively sought roles which put them in harms ways simply as this was where they felt they would be most needed. Creighton was buried with the same honours as the men who fought yet he never raised a gun towards the enemy. Even in the midst of their official duties many chaplains found ways to step beyond the call of duty and put the men under their care, alive or dead, ahead of their own needs and often safety.

Ultimately, it is clear that chaplains played a multifarious role at during the First World War. Whilst the current historiography recognises that chaplains played a role at the front often it fails to recognise to what extent chaplains were required or entirely consider the motivations behind their actions. Physically, they tended to the soldiers under their care and the well-being of the staff they worked alongside. Respect and affection was drawn from their willingness to step into the fray and they remained dedicated to ensuring that as many as possible were interred peacefully despite rising danger to themselves. This desire to contribute arguably clashed with the more traditional spiritual role of the chaplain. Yet what is increasing clear is that the expansion of the role of the British army chaplain, particularly within medical services, was more of a personal choice taken by each serving chaplain than a military command. From the unsocial Horsley-Smith to the heroic Doyle, each chaplain upon reaching his position had to make the choice to either stick to his vague mandate of providing prayer, burial and hand holding or to take on much more. Chaplains such Doudney, Mellish and Creighton all experienced the First World War uniquely and

⁶⁶ Creighton, *Letters*, loc. 4328.

personally and responded to the needs of the men that surrounded them by occupying new roles as required. It is within the occupation of these roles that the chaplain is so important. These were men whose actions were not bound by military orders or profession. The title of chaplain allowed free reign often to do as little or as much as the individual felt appropriate and it is apparent that time and again chaplains fought in their own to support the men who fought daily for their survival.

It is important to return to the frustration of Reverend Geoffrey Gordon over being called 'Mr. God or M. Cinema?'⁶⁷ He asked, 'does the soldier think of his padre in the main as the representative of God, or chiefly as the provider of canteens, cinemas, and creature comforts?'⁶⁸ Simply the answer is both yet the crucial point here is that that the role of the chaplain was often as unique as the man occupying it decided to make it. Emboldened by notions of duty and the unique nature of combat in the First World War many chaplains frequently overstepped their mandate to become essential military personnel, particularly within medical services. These were the men who could take the time to ease the suffering of the wounded and dying and quickly became appreciated as a vital part of team. This is not to diminish those who considered their role to be more spiritual than hands on and choose not to overstep their mandate or those whose attempts were either rejected or refused. But to highlight that the chaplain, regardless of his lack of either weapon or defined purpose, was often a crucial, but often unseen, part of the British military and particularly the army medical services. Working in the dark, behind the scenes or outside of the typically regarded soldiers view of the First World War, many chaplains clearly overstepped their role as they undertook ever increasing duties outside of their original responsibility. They did so for a multitude of uniquely personal reasons and it was these actions that earned them, acceptance, respect and affection from the officers and soldiers with whom they served.

⁶⁷ Pym and Gordon, *Papers from Picardy*, pp.108-9.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*