

A Concise History of the Chaplain Corps

The history of the Chaplain Corps traces its beginnings to 28 November 1775 when the second article of Navy Regulations was adopted. It stated that "the Commanders of the ships of the thirteen United Colonies are to take care that divine services be performed twice a day on board and a sermon preached on Sundays, unless bad weather or other extraordinary accidents prevent." Although chaplains were not specifically mentioned in this article, one can imply that Congress intended that an ordained clergyman be part of ship's company. Later documents support that conclusion.

Reverend Benjamin Balch was the first chaplain known to have served in the Continental Navy, reporting aboard the frigate BOSTON in October 1778. The number of chaplains by the turn of the century only totaled six, and at that, only two were retained. A new edition of Naval Regulations dated 25 January 1802 included reference to the duties of a chaplain. "He is to read prayers at stated periods; perform all funeral ceremonies; perform the duty of schoolmaster instructing the midshipmen and volunteers in writing, arithmetic, navigation and whatever else they might need to make them proficient; and teach the other youths of the ship as the captain orders."

Because of their teaching skills, when various "academies" were established aboard the ships in central ports, the chaplains were called on to be the administrators. Their involvement in these early learning institutions prompted Chaplain George Jones to begin his campaign for the Naval Academy in 1839. The establishment of the Naval School at Annapolis (later the United States Naval Academy) in 1845 was due primarily to Chaplain Jones' efforts.

By October 1906, the Chaplain Corps began to come into its own. Steering away from the teaching function, a board of chaplains appointed by the Secretary of the Navy established guidelines which would require that all newly commissioned chaplains be graduated of both college and seminary and that such should receive the endorsement of their denominations; and that all candidates appear before a board of Navy chaplains for their endorsement as to health and other qualifications. They also recommended that there should be a Chief of Chaplains. The board's recommendations gave birth to the Chaplain Corps as it is known today.

To recount the history of the Chaplain Corps and omit two of its most revered chaplains would be a grave mistake. The bravery of Chaplains Joseph T. O'Callahan and Vincent Capodanno gives credence to the faith by which we stand. Both were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for their remarkable willingness to perform their duties in the face of the fiercest adversities. Their spirit is present in the daily contributions the men and women of the Chaplain Corps continue to make to the Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard today.