

MEANING OF GOD IS REAL  
ON BATTLEFIELD, RABBI SAYS

This article appeared in the Herald, Miami, Fla., in December 1965. It's author, Edmond Gong, is one of Dade County's state representatives. He toured Southeast Asia and reported on the part religion plays in the Vietnam war.

Danang. South Vietnam -- Religion becomes more meaningful to our men fighting in Vietnam because death lurks all around.

There is no front and the Viet Cong cannot be distinguished from the South Vietnamese. The conflict, too, is escalating.

Because of the greater spiritual needs of our men and their scattered locations, Chaplains are having to ride circuit.

I met one of these Chaplains today.

He is Lt. Robert L. Reiner, 30, of Aberdeen, Washington, or more correctly Rabbi Reiner.

"I administer to the spiritual needs of Jewish military men in the I Corps area (the northern quarter of Vietnam) smiled the youthful graduate of the University of Washington and Hebrew Union College.

There are approximately 200 congregants of the Rabbi's with over 100 in the Danang area. "Most of them are between 18 and 21 and are with the Marines here, at Chu Lai and Phu Bai," he explained.

He introduced his assistant, Marine Corps Corporal Ray W. Landsman, of Bronx, N. Y. His duties are to follow the Chaplain wherever he goes to assist in the conducting of services and to act as lay leader when the Chaplain is circuit riding.

Landsman, 22, won a Purple Heart last May during the Chu Lai Operation. He stepped on a mine. "It blew the heels off my combat boots and killed the man walking behind me." Landsman said.

Landsman was lucky. Whoever detonates a land mine usually gets it the worst.

"He was supposed to have been up here for an interview the very day he was wounded," said Rabbi Reiner.

We discussed the effect of war on the rabbi's congregants. "The meaning of death and the meaning of God become real. The men have more time to read serious religious literature during the lulls in the fighting," he continued.

The Jewish Welfare Board provides many of the religious books. "They also provide us with Kosher foods--canned gefilte fish, matzoh ball soup, salami and even bagels now and then," said Landsman with a hungry expression.

The second day he was in Vietnam he received two bagels in the mail. "They were a little hard but they sure tasted good," he laughed.

A group of students at the College of the Pacific in Stockton, California, sent homemade Chanukkah decorations, candies and gifts. "We will light the first candle on December 18 and then go on to December 26th," said Rabbi Reiner.

In order to be able to ride the circuit and conduct service in destroyers, aircraft carriers, jungle command posts, chapels, bunkers or in the open, the rabbi must be able to be mobile and have all the necessary religious articles with him.

To solve the problem, the Navy has supplied him with an altar kit comprised of a set of small Torah scrolls, Yarmulkes, (skullcaps), Talleyceem prayer books, bibles, shofar, prayer shawl and menorah.

The articles fit neatly in a folding case the size of an average suitcase. It is light enough for one man to carry it easily.

While traveling around Rabbi Reiner spends a lot of time before and after every service to counsel and comfort men concerning their personal problems.

The biggest morale booster is mail from home because there are no recreational outlets in combat. "Mail represents America, home and a familiar society so very much different from the one here."

One of the biggest morale depressors is when a man does not get mail from his wife or learns that she is running around. This is especially acute when there are children involved.

Rabbi Reiner and Corporal Landsman had to leave to go to the I Corps hospital where casualties are brought directly from the battlefield. As a Chaplain he administered to members of all faiths.

"We could not function without the aid of all the other Chaplains - we were 'ecumenical' before the Ecumenical Council came into being," he said just before saying goodbye and driving off in a jeep for "Charlie and."