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Foxhole Faith and Funk Religion: Anglo-American Perspectives from Two World Wars

Michael Snape

Abstract

The role of combat as a religious stimulant was widely observed and debated during both World Wars. Through a consideration of American opinion in World War II, especially in the light of British opinion a generation earlier, this paper illustrates that, however similar expressions of combatants' faith may have been across time and space, their perceived value was very much dictated by their wider religious context, and particularly by the existing assumptions and priorities of religious observers and pundits. This meant that, in the American context of World War II, appraisals tended to be much more positive than in the British context of World War I, adding considerable substance and longevity to the claim that 'there are no atheists in foxholes'.

Keywords

US army, British army, World Wars, Religion, Chaplains

The situational and contingent nature of religious belief and practice lies at the heart of one of the best known clichés of modern military life- namely, that 'there are no atheists in foxholes'. In 'Christendom-type' societies of the first half of the twentieth century, where Christian values and frames of reference remained normative and churchgoing was still commonplace,[1] the capacity of combat, its prospect and its aftermath, to stimulate remarkable manifestations of religious belief and practice among soldiers, sailors and airmen was the source of recurrent attention and comment. When, as in Great Britain and much of Western Europe, this phenomenon occurred – and, crucially, was observed – within the context of an overarching

[1] H. McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2007), p.18.

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narrative of inexorable, long-term secularisation, the often fleeting religiosity of predominantly young, adult males (never, in any western Christian society, the churches' core constituency) provoked mixed reactions and conflicting verdicts. For example, and in the case of Great Britain, the apparent resurgence of religion in a growing citizen army during the early months of the First World War was widely seen as a symptom and harbinger of a greater revival of religion in the nation at large. As William Ewing, a Scottish Presbyterian chaplain, wrote of the Gallipoli campaign of 1915–16:

> I was struck with the frequency with which clergymen there said to me that one great outcome of this war, and the experiences through which it is bringing us, will be a heightening of the value attached to prayer. It has led many a man to pray who was not accustomed to pray; for multitudes who have never been prayerless it has lent a new sincerity and earnestness and a deepened sense of reality to their communion with God. We are getting a better understanding of the things that can be shaken, and a clearer view of the things which cannot be shaken. Of course, all men will not be affected in the same way, but it will be strange if, in future, there is not a greater readiness to take counsel with God about all life's affairs.[2]

However, and as the war went on, such manifestations of wartime religiosity were increasingly viewed with scepticism and even scorn. As the celebrated Anglican chaplain G.A. Studdert Kennedy fumed in 1918:

> I remember once in the line, when we were being shelled very heavily, I stood beside an enormous sergeant who was a great friend of mine, and on the other side of me somewhere was a chap that had lost his nerve and was whining out prayers for protection: 'O God, keep me safe!' 'O God, save me!' The sergeant was looking after his men, shouting out warnings to us, and swearing steadily all the time. This fellow's prayers were getting on our nerves, and at last the sergeant turned to me and said, 'That chap's saying his prayers, isn't he, sir?' I said, 'No, he isn't, sergeant, that's not prayer, its wind'.[3]

As Studdert Kennedy saw it, this was not prayer because it was 'purely selfish prayer, and selfish prayer is not prayer at all . . . . The words without the spirit are as useless and as vain as the mumbo-jumbo of a conjuror before he does the trick'.[4] Such harsh verdicts were passed even in subcultures that were thought to be relatively devout. As a Catholic army chaplain stated in 1919, 'Speaking roughly,

[2] W. Ewing, *From Gallipoli to Baghdad* (London: Hodder and Stoughton), pp.128–29.

[3] G.A. Studdert Kennedy, *Rough Talks by a Padre* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1918), pp.225–26.

[4] Ibid, p. 226.

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the fervour of the men's Catholicity was at any moment proportioned to the amount of danger that was to be faced.'[5]

Nevertheless, the fact remains that, when confronted with the same evidence of faith – often nominal, and even residual – raised to a new pitch of intensity by the proximity of danger, different British churchmen evinced different reactions at different stages of the war. However, given the dominance of the contemporary, liberal Protestant commentary on religion in the British army during the First World War, a commentary that has inhered in the historiography of the subject, manifestations of 'the emergency religion of the trenches',[6] or 'funk religion', as it was more dismissively known,[7] were never going to be a source of celebration. For those whose pre-eminent concerns were the social gospel, the revision of public worship, ecumenism and the role of the established churches in national life, such individual bursts of personal religiosity were minor and even spurious distractions from the more compelling business of root and branch reform of church and society. However, the purpose of this paper is to look at combat religion from a rather different angle, namely that of the American experience of the Second World War. This perspective is illuminating for a number of reasons. Firstly, there can be no doubt that the master narrative of secularisation and its underlying assumptions had much less purchase on the minds of American religious commentators in the 1940s than it had on their contemporaries, or near contemporaries, in Great Britain and Europe. Secondly, these commentators were not, unlike many of their British equivalents, preoccupied – even blinkered – by the concerns and imperatives of national religious establishments in relation to the state and wider society. Thirdly, and despite the influence and pretensions of the progressive Protestant 'mainline', American Christianity was theologically and denominationally much more diverse than even Great Britain's religious landscape (which was, by the standards of the 'Old World', remarkable for its plurality). Fourthly, there is the potential for enquiry and comparison that is offered by the scale and complexity of the US armed forces in the Second World War; more than 16 million Americans served in the course of the conflict, in theatres of war ranging from Alaska to New Guinea, and in roles ranging from construction engineers in the jungles of West Africa to aerial gunners in the skies above Germany. Fifthly, and perhaps most importantly, the issue of combat religion was the subject of unprecedented enquiry and discussion on the part of American churchmen,

[5] C. Plater, *Catholic Soldiers* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1919), p.50.

[6] T.W. Pym and G. Gordon, *Papers from Picardy* (London: Constable and Co., 1917), pp.187–88.

[7] D.S. Cairns, *The Army and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1919), p.12.

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giving rise to some of the most famous and tendentious assertions as to the nature, ubiquity and similarity of combatant faith.

'I thank God I'm still alive. I prayed . . . if you don't pray to God and you get into a war, you believe in him. I didn't see an atheist.' So spoke Joe Baldwin, a veteran of the 4th Infantry Division, whose campaign in Northwest Europe commenced at Utah Beach on 6 June 1944.[8] These words, of course, encapsulate the most famous commentary on soldiers' religion in the Second World War, namely that 'There are no atheists in foxholes' – an echo of the British chaplains' maxim of 1914–18 that 'there are no atheists in the trenches'.[9] Attributed to William T. Cummings, an American Catholic missionary who took part in the defence of the Philippines in 1942 and who later died in Japanese captivity,[10] this axiom became one of the best known clichés of the war, still cited by American veterans decades later.[11] His assertion, and the assumptions and sentiments that lay behind it, inspired local variants more suitable to other arms of service. Echoing the title of a 1943 autobiography by the veteran army aviator Colonel Robert L. Scott, a bestseller that was duly adapted for the big screen, the conviction that 'God Is My Co-Pilot' was often expressed by American airmen. After making the fearsome mistake of releasing his B-29's bomb load onto his own runway before even taking off on one bombing mission, Gordon Bennett Robertson wrote to his wife: 'Well, I know now that God is my co-pilot, and he gets on board before I take off'.[12] Similarly, Norman Wesley Achen, a P-51 pilot who was shot down over Germany in 1944, recollected passing his controls to God as his plane crash-landed. Recalling the crash, and his later captivity and escape, Achen maintained that 'He's a good co-pilot. They don't come any better.'[13] Significantly, American chaplains appealed directly to this wartime commonplace among aviators. One article in *The Link*, a widely-circulated Protestant magazine for servicemen, advised fliers to 'Avoid Crack-Ups' by using their conscience as their compass, the Bible as their octant, God's purpose as their radio beam, and Christ as their co-pilot- one who

[8] Veterans History Project Collection, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington DC, Joe Baldwin Collection (AFC 2001/001/9825).

[9] J. Bickersteth (ed.), *The Bickersteth Diaries, 1914–1918* (London: Leo Cooper, 1996), p.168.

[10] D.F. Crosby, *Battlefield Chaplains* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1994), pp.26–27.

[11] See responses to Question 31 a in the US Army Military History Institute's World War II Veterans Survey, United States Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

[12] G.B. Robertson, *Bringing the Thunder: The Missions of a World War II B-29 Pilot in the Pacific* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2006), pp.134–36.

[13] Veterans History Project Collection, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington DC, Norman Wesley Achen Collection (AFC 2001/001/48504).

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'can fly us on through – through even the Valley of the Shadow of Death – and make for us a happy landing'.[14]

Cummings' adage also resonated among American sailors. As Douglas E. Leach, who served on a destroyer in the Pacific, put it: 'Somebody once remarked that there were no atheists in the foxholes.... But it was equally true that there were few atheists among those Americans who went down to the sea in ships.'[15] For those sailors who saw action, and survived, the reality of God's protection could be no less apparent than for the infantry who survived the proverbial foxhole. Reviewing the wartime adventures of the light cruiser USS *Montpelier*, James J. Fahey wrote:

> The U.S.S. *Montpelier* set a record that will be hard to touch. It bombarded Jap-held strongholds 53 times. It participated in 26 invasions, 42 operations and 30 campaigns against the Japanese.... Back in 1942 if someone told me that the U.S.S. *Montpelier* would come through all this, I would not have believed him. I am not saying this because I want to brag. I am saying it to show how the Good Lord always watched over us at all times. The U.S.S. *Montpelier* was also His flagship.[16]

The perils of the oceans themselves, and the fear of being cast adrift on millions of square miles of the Pacific or the Atlantic, cast a long shadow over those who served on, above or beneath them, even evoking the sentiments of the psalmist, 'They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters; These see the works of the LORD, and his wonders in the deep.'[17] As Samuel Hynes put it, for Marine Corps aviators 'The thought of being lost at sea became a new nightmare, the worst form of dying.'[18] In view of this widespread fear, and the seemingly miraculous survival of some who found themselves in that dread predicament,[19] 'life-raft religion' duly evolved as a sub-species of emergency religion, alongside that of the foxhole and belief in the divine co-pilot.[20]

Still, Cummings' dictum did not go uncontested, becoming stale and disputed even before the Second World War had ended. There were, of course, several grounds on which to take issue with this statement. Despite the extraordinary religious stimuli provided by

[14] *The Link*, January 1945, pp.13–14.

[15] D.E. Leach, *Now Hear This: The Memoir of a Junior Naval Officer in the Great Pacific War* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1987), p.93.

[16] James J. Fahey, *Pacific War Diary, 1942–1945* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), p.402.

[17] Psalm 107: 23–24.

[18] S. Hynes, *Flights of Passage: Recollections of a World War II Aviator* (London: Bloomsbury, 1988, 2005 printing), p.182.

[19] *The Link*, September 1943, pp.20–21.

[20] Ibid, April 1944, pp.12–15.

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combat, public opinion polls (to say nothing of the vast majority of American service personnel who expressed a religious preference on their induction) showed that atheists were a rarity in American society at large. Although that point was rarely made during the Second World War, there was also the salutary fact that not every soldier, sailor, airman or marine turned to the Almighty in times of danger. While this was sometimes due to the practical demands of a particular combat role, it could also arise from sheer indifference or hostility towards religion. Lester Atwell, a practising Catholic whose wartime milieu was that of the religiously susceptible combat infantryman, maintained that, 'Even in our own small group there were several Catholics in name only, and there had been many in C Company. I often wondered how the comfortable expression grew up: "There are no atheists in the foxholes."'[21] Early in the Guadalcanal campaign of 1942–43, and in an incident that prompted a rare moment of self-doubt, navy chaplain Warren Wyeth Willard (a Northern Baptist, and a fundamentalist) encountered a marine who remained resistant to the consolations of religion in the face of death itself:

> A wounded sergeant was brought in from Tanambogo. He had been shot through the abdomen. I could see by the cold sweat on his face that he was dying. I knelt beside him and spoke softly. 'Sergeant, I'm your chaplain. May I read to you from the Word of God? Or would you like to have me pray with you?'
>
> 'I never went much for that stuff back home,' he answered weakly, 'and I don't care for it now.'[22]

Of the religiosity of US airmen in India, and that of the 341st Bombardment Group in particular, Chaplain Thomas H. Clare of the Evangelical and Reformed Church concluded that the picture was distinctly mixed: 'Do these boys think of religion when they get into tight spots? Some of them do; others do not.'[23] To illustrate his point, Clare cited the different reactions evinced among a crew whose aircraft had got into trouble, their pilot telling him that:

> Here's one for the book, Chaplain: I was too darned busy in that plane to think about praying, but as we were coming down I did call Porter on the radio and say: 'Porter, this is it. If you want to do any praying, brother, do it now.' 'You pray,' he answered. 'I'm getting ready to jump.'

[21] L. Atwell, *Private* (London: Transworld Publishers, 1961), p.154.

[22] W.W. Willard, *The Leathernecks Come Through* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1944), p.27.

[23] T.H. and I.M.H. Clare, *Lookin' Eastward, a G. I. Salaam to India* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1945), p.126.

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Nevertheless, and according to the April 1944 edition of *What the Soldier Thinks*, the self-proclaimed 'Monthly Digest of War Department Studies on the Attitudes of American Troops':

> The judgment that '*there are no atheists in foxholes*' is close to the truth, if one is to examine the statements of officers and men on the power of prayer to help banish fear.... Prayer is more likely to be a help to enlisted men than to officers, but even among officers, a majority from both theaters [i.e. the Mediterranean and the Pacific] say that it helped them a lot when the going was tough. *Almost two out of three* enlisted men say the same and less than one man in five says the thought of prayer never occurred to him. Among officers, one in four says he never thought of it.[24]

Five years later, a compendious post-war study of *The American Soldier* by America's Social Science Research Council confirmed these findings, concluding that 'the fact that such an overwhelming majority of combat men said that prayer helped them a lot certainly means that they almost universally had recourse to prayer and probably found relief, distraction, or consolation in the process'.[25] If social scientists were content to confirm the prevalence of 'foxhole religion', as in Great Britain during the First World War its symptoms had the effect of markedly dividing religious commentators. To some, who shared the views of Studdert Kennedy, fevered supplications for personal deliverance born of sheer physical terror were practically worthless, being the acme of the so-called 'gimme-prayer', and their opinions could come into conflict with more positive appraisals.[26] In 1943, and drawing on his experiences in the First World War, former army Chief of Chaplains Alva J. Brasted, a Northern Baptist, published an article in the journal *Religious Education* in which he compared the religion of America's Doughboys in the First World War to that of its GIs in the Second. In particular, Brasted recalled his experiences on board a troopship that had nearly gone down in a severe tropical storm, a situation that had triggered a welter of prayer among those on board and which produced large services of thanksgiving after the storm abated. For Brasted the lesson was clear: 'In the first World War, in this, and invariably when men are face to face with death they look Godward – the help of religion is sought.'[27] However, in the very next issue of the journal Brasted's claims met with an angry response

[24] *What the Soldier Thinks*, April 1944, pp.1–2.

[25] S.A. Stouffer, *The American Soldier* (2 vols) (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949), II, p.185.

[26] D.F. Grant, *War Is My Parish* (Milwaukee, WI: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1944), p.101.

[27] A.J. Brasted, 'Religion of Our Soldiers: A Comparison of the Religious Attitudes and Needs of Men in the First World War and the War Today', *Religious Education*, 38 (1943): 188–94, p.190.

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from Dr. J. Hutton Hynd of the rationalist and ultra-liberal Ethical Society of St. Louis, who deplored the crude assumptions that underlay Brasted's story, claiming that his article merely confirmed 'the view that religion . . . is a matter of calling for help in a predicament – a peculiarly popular yet pernicious view of religion'. Revolted by the claim that 'There are no atheists in fox-holes' (which, Hynd wearily noted, was 'quoted far and wide, and with general assent and relish')[28] he harked back to his own experiences as a Royal Air Force mechanic in the First World War, claiming to be grimly familiar with the worthlessness of such situational faith in the British armed forces:

> To the men . . . any person who took 'religion' seriously was a mere goody-goody to be laughed at. But when danger threatened – prayer, Bible reading, mascots, etc. etc. This is NOT religion; it is more akin to crass superstition. Religion is a way of life. Religion does not give one safety; religion does not bring him home again. A religious service, chaplain and all, was wiped out by a Japanese bomb the other day. That's how it goes. I think the chaplains should make it clear to the men that religion is a matter of daily living – not a matter of calling upon the gods in a fox-hole. There is something wrong with religious education when such a notion of religion is accepted so generally and officially.[29]

Others, however, were disposed to view symptoms of foxhole religion more favourably, as early signs of religious awakening and even as proofs of the veracity of Proverbs 9:10 – 'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom'. In fact, the evangelical and conversionist traditions of American Protestantism, still very much alive in this generation despite the agendas and preoccupations of more progressive opinion, seem to have nurtured a common and instinctive sympathy with the oft-touted maxim of the seventeenth-century Puritan divine, John Flavel, who averred that 'Man's extremity is God's opportunity'.[30] As one army chaplain declared, 'I say that it is better for a man to be exposed to the way of salvation in an hour of crisis than to fail to have any knowledge of it at all. One never knows when the salvation of his God will break through upon his needy soul.'[31] The divergence between transatlantic perspectives on this phenomenon had been illustrated in the wake of the First World War, when committees of British and American churchmen had published parallel reports on the religious condition of their armies. For the British, who were largely concerned with remodelling English and Scottish Christianity in the post-war era, the importance of 'funk

[28] J.H. Hynd, 'How Fares Religion in the Fox Holes?', *Religious Education*, 38 (1943): 379–83, p.380.
[29] Ibid, p.379.
[30] M.L. Runbeck, *The Great Answer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1944), p.78.
[31] P.M. Hickcox, *Mine Eyes Have Seen* (Boston: Mosher Press, 1950), p.42.

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religion' (so called) could be too easily downplayed or too readily exaggerated; essentially, it reflected the existence of an elemental belief in 'an Unseen Power, inaccessible to the senses, which is yet mightier than high explosives, which knows all and which hears prayer'.[32] For the Americans, however, the existence of 'the emergency religion of the trenches' was much more encouraging:

> It is not unreasonable to expect that some few men have returned with the vivid memory of times when the entire dependence of man on a power greater than man, the need and possibility of the companionship of God, and the care of One who knoweth even the sparrows when they fall, was keenly felt. The experiences may have been bound up with much that is crude and on the level with 'natural' religion [but] 'An idea is not necessarily false because it is primitive. To discover for one's self whatever truth there is in the simpler phases of religion may be the best way to revitalize more adequate forms more conventionally held.'[33]

As we have seen in the exchange between Brasted and Hynd, this unresolved debate was revived in the crucible of the Second World War. Reflecting on the 'Lessons of Guadalcanal' in the distinctly secular *Marine Corps Gazette* of August 1943, Captain Gerald H. Shea announced that 'as on Bataan there are no atheists on Guadalcanal. Religion plays a large part in men's lives during war everywhere; many a man wears his cross or Saint Christopher medal right along with his dog tags.'[34] However, Arthur F. Glasser, one of the few separatist fundamentalists among the chaplains of the US Navy, had very different ideas. According to Glasser, the essential baseness of foxhole religion meant that it was positively obstructive to the growth of real faith; conscious of how they had broken promises made to God in moments of sheer terror, backsliders were too ashamed to be receptive to the Gospel thereafter. After conducting his own interviews with veterans of Guadalcanal, Glasser averred that:

> A prayer for help from physical danger is far different from the pattern of true prayer laid down in the Bible .... This true prayer of repentance and faith is apparently what God rarely heard on Guadalcanal. Through ignorance the men merely prayed for physical protection, fully confident that if God would hear their prayers and help them, they would never fail in their devotion to Him. But they found that their experiences alone were insufficient to preserve their spiritual life. Even the

[32] Cairns, *The Army and Religion*, 1919, pp.7–8.

[33] Committee on the War and the Religious Outlook, *Religion Among American Men as Revealed by a Study of Conditions in the Army* (New York: Association Press, 1920), pp.79, 82.

[34] *The Marine Corps Gazette*, August 1943, p.20.

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> most vivid memories soon faded and they then fell into sin. Skepticism and disillusionment resulted. Praying now seemed hypocritical.[35]

A more nuanced opinion could be taken by others. Rather than condemning foxhole religion as a source of scandal for 'the cause of Christ',[36] Roy B. Anderson, another navy chaplain and Northern Baptist, was inclined to see both sides of the argument in reflecting on his own experience of a navy Construction Battalion in the Pacific. According to Anderson, 'As superficial as some of these experiences might have been, today some men are Christians because a bomb or shell landed too close for comfort.'[37] Typically bullish, Anderson's fellow Northern Baptist, Warren Wyeth Willard, was much less equivocal: 'It has been said that there are no atheists in foxholes. It may be added that there are no unbelievers when the big guns open up. False philosophies dissolve before the reality of death. All becomes vain but the Christian hope.'[38] Significantly, a fourth Navy chaplain, M.M. Tennessen, a Catholic, shared Willard's confidence, writing to Bishop Bergan of Des Moines:

> Back in the States, every church and probably every pastor was witness to the loss of faith and leakage from the fold, especially in the growing generation of our youth. Not so in so-called war zones. A little bomb and its reverberation, sending all into fox-holes or dugouts, carries a religious call instead of the church bells or chimes. And a bomb will do the impossible especially if it sounds on a Saturday night. The next day many a new face will be seen at divine services, a face that will tell the story of a sleepless night: bombs increase church attendance.[39]

A similar range of views was apparent in the US army. In June 1945, *Time* magazine reported that one army chaplain, Lewis A. Myers, had condemned foxhole religion as a mere sophism in the pages of the *Arkansas Baptist*. From his experience as a chaplain on board transport ships, Myers argued that most GIs were heading back to the United States hardened to the gospel message, heedless of religious services, and as inveterate cursers and gamblers. As Myers saw it, all of this pointed to the failure of their Christian training and the fatuity of foxhole faith:

> Foxholes are not valid agents for making Christians, for destroying atheists or for driving men to God .... If you desire a man to come out of a foxhole with something, you had better send him in with

[35] A.F. Glasser, *And Some Believed: A Chaplain's Experiences with the Marines in the South Pacific* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1946), p.87.

[36] Ibid, p.88.

[37] M.L. Leuschner, C.F. Zummach, W.E. Kohrs, *Religion in the Ranks* (Cleveland, OH: Roger Williams Press, 1946), pp.42–43.

[38] Willard, *The Leathernecks Come Through*, pp.59–60.

[39] Grant, *War Is My Parish*, p.141.

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> something . . . foxholes are not now and never will do the work of our Christian institutions.[40]

Edward K. Rogers, a much-decorated United Lutheran chaplain who served with the 1st Infantry Division in the Mediterranean and Northwest Europe, found it much harder to come to a fixed view of the subject. After hard fighting at Long Stop Hill in Tunisia, he found that 'a great host of men came to church' the following Sunday. Significantly, 'Many had never bothered to do so before and many such were quite faithful thereafter.'[41] Later, in Normandy, Rogers had real difficulty in controlling the size of his congregations at impromptu field services:

> The first Sunday ashore we were able to have a number of services and the men came in goodly numbers. After that it was almost impossible to hold a service because of artillery and mortar fire and what few we had were limited in attendance to about fifteen men. It was impossible to keep the number under control for each time one opened his eyes after a prayer or looked up from reading a few more had joined the circle. It was an old familiar story of men wanting to worship in combat.[42]

As for the GIs he baptised, often as a direct result of an awakened religious consciousness, the high casualties and high turnover of manpower experienced by infantry regiments made it hard to judge: 'I will say that most of the men whom I have instructed and baptized have been very sincere about their faith. Seventy-five percent of them have left us one way or another during the past two years so I can't speak of their present religious life.'[43] All in all, however, Rogers was not unduly optimistic, concluding that '"combat religion" is soon forgotten by some men . . . . Often it does a lot of good, perhaps more often it rolls off like water off a duck's back'.[44]

However, and highly conscious of the need to promote a positive image of army chaplains and their work among the American public, the Office of the Chief of Chaplains placed a distinctly positive gloss on these confusing symptoms of faith. In his introduction to the 1945 volume *Soldiers of God*, a study of army chaplaincy work, the army's astute Chief of Chaplains, William R. Arnold, a Catholic, declared that: '[T]his is not a book to glorify "foxhole religion." The purpose of *Soldiers of God* is not to select a few dramatic conversions to faith

[40] *Time*, 18 June 1945.

[41] E.K. Rogers, *Doughboy Chaplain* (Boston: Meador Publishing Company, 1946), p.48.

[42] Ibid, p.154.

[43] Ibid, p.166.

[44] Ibid, p.96.

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and point to these as proof of a religious upsurge.' Nonetheless, and as Arnold went on:

> We all know that many men who never before were devoted to God have found faith under fire. That is one of the results of war, neither to be accepted as necessarily representative of the experiences of all servicemen, nor to be condemned as hypocritical or transitory. There are those who do not see the relationship of religion to their day-by-day living until they face a crisis, a fact true in peace as well as war.[45]

Basically, his assertions reprised a central theme in an earlier, 1944 anthology *Faith of Our Fighters*, in which numerous chaplains had insisted on the value, veracity and longevity of the kind of faith that was to be discovered in a foxhole. The very first chapter, by Chaplain Philip H. Oxnam, son of the Methodist Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam, was entitled 'I Know They Believe!' and began:

> It was in a psychology class back at the University of Nebraska, and my professor was making a rather large statement. He said, 'A man's true character appears in a crisis.' At that time, I thought that the statement was foolish; but today, as I stand near the front, I know that it is a solid fact.'[46]

According to Oxnam, the first air raid his battalion experienced led to a doubling of church attendance and to 'a thousandfold' improvement in its language. He was certain, he insisted, 'that when these men return to their homes, they will come back God-fearing men. They will be real men with their hearts and eyes opened.'[47] Similarly, and in considering the question of 'What War Does to Spiritual Sensibilities', Richard H. Chase, a Christian Scientist army chaplain, thought that the answer was obvious:

> Artillery barrages, bombings, and strafings 'make a Christian out of you.' They send a man to his knees because, as Abraham Lincoln said of himself, he has no other place to go. God is his only hope of safety, since pillboxes, fortifications, foxholes – everything devised by man – have proved inadequate to protect from injury and death . . . . Every day more and more soldiers in my regiment look to God, according to the dictates of their own consciences, for enlightenment, hope, protection, and peace. Each Sunday I see in my congregation the faces of men who never attended chapel in the States, men who have not prayed, read their Bibles, or even visited a civilian church in years.[48]

[45] C. Cross and W.R. Arnold, *Soldiers of God* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1945), p.15.

[46] E.C. Nance, *Faith of Our Fighters* (St. Louis, MO: Bethany Press, 1944), p.23.

[47] Ibid, p.27.

[48] Ibid, pp.28–29.

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It was, however, left to De Loss I. Marken, a Disciples of Christ chaplain with the 34th Infantry Division, to summarise a central theme of this book: 'These boys learn to know God. You know you don't need colored windows and a pipe organ to worship God. There's no better place in the world to learn to know God than a foxhole.'[49]

In fairness, and despite dissenting or ambivalent voices, the prevailing view among army chaplains does seem to have been that combat *did* serve as a positive stimulant to personal faith. As an unidentified chaplain of the 81st Infantry Division emphasized:

> Some men say that the man who turns to God in the foxhole and then forgets Him when the smoke of battle clears away, derives little benefit from such an experience. I believe that such a man has taken an important initial step in securing salvation for his soul. Whether or not he further enters into a relationship with God that is lasting cannot yet be determined.[50]

A Presbyterian USA chaplain, Eben Cobb Brink, claimed from his experiences with the 1st Armored Division in North Africa in 1942–43 that 'The battlefield offers, to those who are able to listen amidst the turmoil of conflict, a stirring study of men's souls.'[51] The sincerity and potential of the kind of faith to be aroused on the battlefield was confirmed at some length by Chaplain Alvin O. Carlson in his book *He Is Able: Faith Overcomes Fear in a Foxhole* (1945). Here, Carlson, another Presbyterian, majored on the authenticity of many battlefield conversions, their long-term gestation in camp, at home, at church, and at Sunday school, and on the duty of the church to support converted veterans on their return to civilian society.[52] Nor did *The Link* magazine fail to deliver a positive verdict on the essential value of 'foxhole religion' and its several variants. In a 1944 article entitled 'When the Chips Are Down', Dr. William L. Stidger of Boston University's School of Theology pronounced that 'Men don't kid when the chips are down':

> We are all dead in earnest and there is no bluffing, no camouflage, no bunk . . . . That's why American soldiers who never did much praying before are praying now, and are doing so without apology or shame. From all over the world dispatches tell of officers and men who get in tight places praying because they have no other place to go, for the chips are down all over this globe just now, and men know it when they face death.[53]

[49] Ibid, p.154.
[50] Hickcox, *Mine Eyes Have Seen*, pp.41–42.
[51] E.C. Brink, *And God Was There* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1944), p.53.
[52] A.O. Carlson, *He Is Able: Faith Overcomes Fear in a Foxhole* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1945), pp.24, 34, 80–82.
[53] *The Link*, February 1944, p.2.

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If most army chaplains were prepared to recognise some inherent value in 'foxhole religion', a few, anticipating Carlson's advice, took active steps to nurture it. In Italy in March 1944, for example, Chaplain Israel Yost, a United Lutheran, sought to prick the consciences of his own foxhole religionists in the Japanese-American 100th Infantry Battalion by adding some comic verse to his church notices:

> A great many men will pray in a pinch
> When bullets and shells whistle near,
> And then will forget to worship their God
> When they're safe and there's nothing to fear.

Later, Yost was gratified to hear 'from some of the old-timers that my verse on the church notices was stirring up the consciences of some'.[54] Significantly, the very first issue of *The Chaplain* magazine in October 1944 stressed the need for further discussion of 'the after-results of religion that grows so luxuriantly in foxholes'. In particular, another United Lutheran chaplain, Albert W. Schumaker, was eager to establish 'What happens to it when the men leave the frontlines and are no longer in need of any divine miracles to save their skins?' Thus prodded, the magazine inquired, 'Is there anyone present who can outline the best procedures for a chaplain's foxhole follow-up?'[55] One chaplain who could was Chaplain F.H. Woyke, a Northern Baptist who served in Northwest Europe with the 279th Station Hospital. In his case, Woyke sought to factor the effects of foxhole religion into his personal programme of preaching:

> With many in the audience unconverted, evangelistic sermons have been frequent. For those who had just recently turned to God in foxholes, I included sermons on the meaning and development of the Christian life. At one time I preached a series of 'foxhole sermons' on texts which the men had circled as they read their Bibles in combat.[56]

Similarly, in March 1945 *The Chaplain* carried a letter from Chaplain W.P. Smith, a Methodist, who reported on a pastoral programme that had been devised by another Northern Baptist, Chaplain William F. Shearin, to ensure that 'religious experiences in the foxholes are lasting':

> Chaplain William F. Shearin, senior chaplain in a general hospital in North Africa, is doing one of the finest jobs I have ever seen of helping these men who return from the front evaluate their religious experiences. He has some kind of religious meeting several nights

[54] I.A.S. Yost, M.E. Yost, M. Markrich, *Combat Chaplain: The Personal Story of the World War II Chaplain of the Japanese American 100th Battalion* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), pp.130–31.

[55] *The Chaplain*, October 1944, p.41.

[56] Leuschner, Zummach and Kohrs, *Religion in the Ranks*, p.69.

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> each week. These meetings are well attended and the men enter into the discussions and activities with enthusiasm. Here they have the opportunity to think through their religious experiences at the front and to tell others about them . . . . If a program similar to Chaplain Shearin's could be carried out at all our general hospitals where the wounded men come back from the front, a great deal would be accomplished toward helping these men who turned to God in the 'foxhole' keep close to him all the rest of their lives.[57]

Given its ubiquity and its potential promise for post-war religion, a preoccupation with foxhole religion was evident even beyond military circles. It was, for example, the subject of a lengthy radio debate by a panel of civilian churchmen in September 1944. Under the aegis of Northwestern University Reviewing Stand, a programme carried by the Chicago-based broadcaster WGN, the panel concluded that foxhole religion was not 'a very high grade expression of faith'. Nevertheless, this consensus obscured a variety of personal opinions: Rabbi Maurice Pekarsky understood it as 'a religion of crisis', Charles W. Kegley, a Lutheran pastor and 'chairman of the university's board of religion', decried it as 'scared stiff religion', while John Huess, an Episcopalian, was inclined to think that it 'may be the beginning' of a 'higher kind' of religion.[58] In April 1945, *The Link* published an essay entitled 'Foxhole Religion' in which Chaplain Oscar A. Withee took a close, if rather impressionistic, look at the subject. According to Withee, foxhole religion followed three general trajectories 'depending upon the man concerned'. Firstly, there was the devout believer who prayed for moral support and that God's will be done; he would live, or die, in a laudable state of Christian resignation. Secondly, there was the soldier who prayed 'for simple bodily deliverance'; he kept 'his foxhole religion as a handy life-preserver for emergencies' but was fundamentally indifferent to religion. In the safety of home especially, his combat experience was liable to be forgotten 'and there is no practice of any Christian virtues or contribution to the things God is interested in'. Thirdly, however, there was the soldier who likewise prayed 'to be delivered bodily' but whose experience then led him 'to further look into the part prayer plays in life and for what purpose God may have spared him. He senses an obligation and seeks to fulfil it as a useful Christian citizen'.[59] More systematic, however, was a survey conducted by Wayne L. Hunter, a senior army chaplain in the Pacific, of the religious behaviour of the 1st Cavalry Division from July 1943 to June 1944. Over this period of time, the division moved to Australia, where it trained before being sent to New Guinea, and then to the Admiralty Islands, where

[57] *The Chaplain*, March 1945, pp.30–31.
[58] *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 4 September 1944, p.21.
[59] *The Link*, April 1945, pp.6–7.

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it saw combat from February to April 1944. Very significantly for those who stressed the importance of nurturing foxhole faith, Hunter identified the post-combat month of May 1944 as the peak period in terms of communions, confessions and general church attendance, easily exceeding those of the Christmas, Easter and pre-combat periods. Thus, Hunter arrived at the critical deduction that 'men are as ready to express thanks as they are to ask for favors'; as Hunter concluded, 'the increase during the month of May can be accounted for only by a change of attitude on the part of those who experienced combat'.[60]

However much ink was spilt, or debate was had, over the merits and demerits of 'foxhole religion', it is clear from the study of the US armed forces in the Second World War that this ubiquitous phenomenon was widely regarded as an authentic and legitimate expression of an often nascent and untutored personal faith. Significantly, and when compared with the British experience of the First World War, it seems very clear that different 'christendom' contexts, with their specific histories, priorities and assumptions, could produce highly divergent perspectives on the same phenomena. Uninhibited by a dominant assumption of religious decline, unfettered by the concerns of establishment, and still heavily influenced by an evangelical and conversionist heritage that placed a heavy onus on individual experience, for most American churchmen of the 1940s it would appear that 'foxhole religion' was something to be accepted, scrutinised and cultivated. Though its symptoms were essentially the same as the emergency religion of the trenches (or 'funk religion') of the British soldier in the First World War, it was not so easily or peremptorily dismissed as a desperate and even selfish expression of personal belief, one that had little to no bearing on a much more pressing agenda for wider societal and ecclesiastical change.

Dr. Michael Snape
Reader in Religion, War and Society
School of History and Cultures
University of Birmingham
B15 2TT

E-mail: M.F.Snape@bham.ac.uk

[60] 'History of Chaplains' Activities in the Pacific', GHQ, AFPAC: Chaplain Section, 1946, pp.440–47.

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