

A Naval History of Great Britain: During the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, Vol. 5: 1808-1811

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Confederate Chaplain Thomas Caskey of the 16th Mississippi Calvary, who was dubbed the “fighting parson,” revealed that he thought it “not good policy for a one-horse preacher to arbitrarily commit the God of the universe to either side of a personal difficulty.” His comment reveals the struggle endured by men of the cloth when they joined the fighting forces drawn directly from their communities. This short collection includes essay overviews and rosters of chaplains from both the Union and the Confederacy, and personal recollections through memoirs and letters. It is an accurate description of how men were able to maintain religious conviction despite the horror, despair, and boredom of war.

“Holy Joes” did not have a definite position or prescribed duty. New York Chaplain William R. Eastman recalled that the “significance of the chaplaincy was this: that the government offered to each regiment one man to be a friend to every man. This man was to make a business of kindness.” Most did make their primary purpose one of comfort to those soldiers on their way to die or already dying, but some, such as Caskey, were overwhelmed by the war and its contradictions to their profession. After he had chosen to abandon the Bible as a source for his sermons, finding that his preaching did not make the soldiers “hard fighters,” Caskey picked up a gun and fought alongside his flock. (He would only shoot at the legs of his adversaries, as he was opposed to killing.)

Although they may have fought and died alongside other soldiers, chaplains were set apart: they could not be held as prisoners of war and were considered non-combatants; they had a uniform of plain black without ornamentation; and a pension was awarded only if they were killed during active duty.

The most interesting detail of this collection is the collaboration between different denominations across regiments. The general policy was to have a chaplain who represented three-fourths of the religious denomination of his regiment. After the battle of Spotsylvania, Eastman, a Protestant, was attending to a dying Roman Catholic soldier who requested to see a priest. Two miles away, Father Corby could not be convinced to leave the fifty dying souls he was already attending. Corby told Eastman to assure the soldier that the Protestant minister could receive his confession and administer the final rites, and the soldier died in Eastman’s arms.

The roster at the end of the book includes the name, dates of birth and death, denomination, and regimental association of each chaplain, in addition to the personal memoirs and letters.

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