



# Interfaith school for military chaplains dedicated

Posted 5/7/2010 7:50 PM

By **Susanne M. Schafer, The Associated Press**

FORT JACKSON, S.C. — Priests, rabbis, imams and Protestant ministers who serve as U.S. military chaplains came together Thursday to dedicate themselves and the nation's first joint military school for tending warriors' souls.

"We deploy side-by-side. We minister to all, side-by-side. It is only fitting that we train side-by-side," said Chaplain Maj. Gen. Cecil Richardson, the Air Force Chief of Chaplains, at the dedication of the new Armed Forces Chaplaincy Center

Congress ordered the military services five years ago to merge their disparate chaplain and chaplain assistant schools. Representatives of the Army, Navy and Air Force said they put aside differences of military culture to build a multi-faith education center.

The site is next to the Army's Chaplain Center and School, which trains the most chaplains of all service branches. This year, the three services expect to graduate just under 2,800 chaplains and chaplain assistants.

Military chaplains hold their own faith services, but may oversee non-denominational events. If requested, they can offer counseling to any uniformed service members or relatives, as well as civilians and contractors who work for the military. They are trained to help uniformed men and women deal with the trauma of war and issues such as deployments and reunions. Some specialize in such things as marriage, family or anti-suicide counseling.

The joint center allows for some merged classes and lectures — for example, when an expert in preaching or writing sermons is able to visit.

Some things, however, won't change: The three

services retain some individual training, and all chaplains wear the uniforms and ranks of their respective branches. And before entering the military as chaplains, they must be ordained or certified in their specific faith group.

Some wondered aloud which will be harder: bridging differences of faith or melding military traditions.

"Why move us 900 miles to reposition us with the Army? Oh God, why us?" joked Rear Adm. Robert Burt, the Navy Chief of Chaplains, whose school was once in Newport, R.I. "This was the ultimate test of faith!"

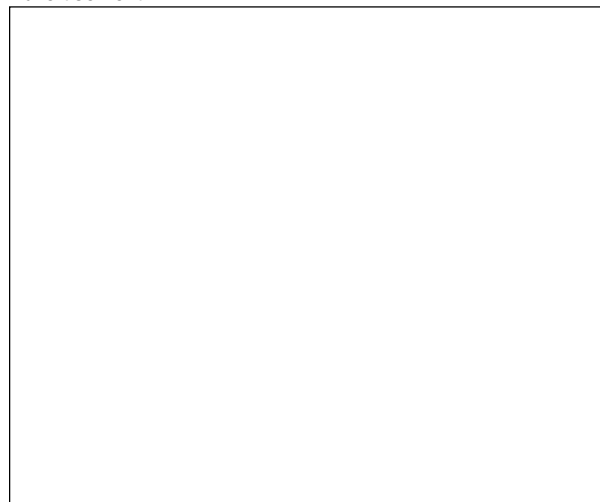
Navy Chaplain Lt. Matthew Prince, who dons a [Marine Corps](#) uniform as a Lutheran minister to [Marines](#) at Parris Island, called it a good move, since many deploy alongside other service branches in time of war. But he still has concerns.

"Look around. Where is the water?" he said, spreading his arms wide at the green fields surrounding the school. "It's a benefit to get to know other military cultures, but I don't want our Navy military culture to be lost."

The director of the new Chaplaincy Center, Air Force Chaplain Col. Steven Keith, said the directors of the schools worked to bring elements of their institutions together.

Stained glass from a closed Air Force chapel in Germany and a closed Army chapel in New Jersey

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were rebuilt and hung in the hallways.

The center has "worship training labs" so instructors can discuss diverse faiths, with items brought from the various military schools. Golden icons line the walls in a small Greek Orthodox chapel; a Muslim prayer room is outfitted with prayer rugs and copies of the Quran; and a handwritten Jewish Torah is kept inside a wooden ark, alongside Sabbath candles and Seder plates to show how Passover is celebrated.

Setting the tone in the center's front lobby is a large stained glass portrayal of Gen. [George Washington](#), kneeling in prayer with his Anglican chaplain and his soldiers in the snow at Valley Forge.

The school means "we get to explore each other's traditions, history, culture. We think we are all going to be better off for it," said Keith, a Baptist minister.

Army Chaplain Lt. Col. A-Rasheed [Muhammad](#), who in 1993 became the first Muslim Imam to serve as a chaplain in the military, said he is able to explain what the Bible and the Quran have in common, and how Muslims regard Jesus and the prophets.

"It is important to bridge those gaps," said Muhammad, who teaches courses on Islam, world religions and counseling.

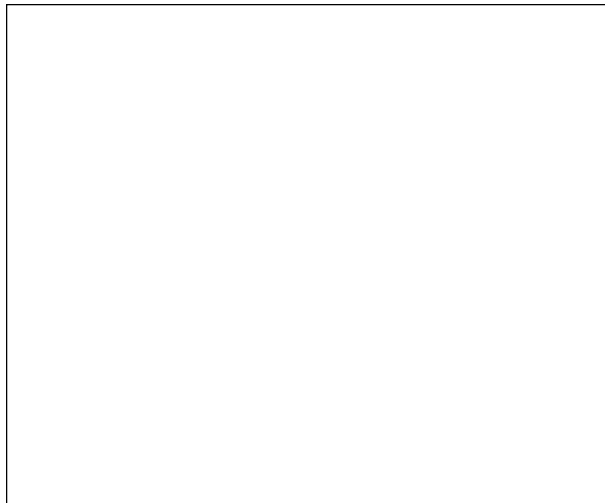
The new school came about due to the 2005 Base Closure and Realignment process. The Air Force had its school at Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala., while the Navy had schools at the Naval Air Station in Meridian, Miss., and Naval Station Newport, R.I.

The \$11 million joint center has sections for Air Force and Navy offices, but also contains teaching labs, instruction rooms and a 300-seat auditorium that can be used by all the services.

The length of training can run from six to eight weeks, depending on the service branch. The new school has about 44 hours of merged instruction, Keith said.

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