

Dept. of Military Affairs: Outgoing state chaplain reflects on 25-year career

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After a quarter century in uniform, one deployment, too many death notifications and dozens of Strong Bonds relationship events, Col. Doug Hedman — the Wisconsin National Guard's state chaplain — is calling it a career.

For the past 13 years Hedman has been the full-time chaplain for the Wisconsin National Guard, and the senior state chaplain for the last three years. The full-time chaplain conducts the daily activities of the chaplain corps, and represents the state chaplain in his absence. The state chaplain, which is a traditional Guard position — that is, one weekend drill per month and a 15-day annual training period — is the senior leaders' chaplain, ensuring that chaplain support occurs throughout the state as well as approving new chaplains and chaplain candidates into the Wisconsin National Guard.

Over the course of his career, he has seen the importance of the chaplain corps become better understood in the organization.

“Everyone knew we were important, but they didn't know how to use us,” Hedman said. “We do a lot of behind-the-scene things, confidential things. Our biggest job is really to talk to Soldiers. We have all these different experts in different fields and lots of help for Soldiers, and we really need to work holistically rather than in individual silos.”

Hedman said, as more service members list “none” for their religious preference, he finds that troops are skeptical of the role chaplains play in the military.

“You take people where they’re at,” Hedman explained. “You don’t force religion on people, but you can provide perspective and clarity.”

Hedman said he had inklings of wanting to join the military while he was in seminary to become a Lutheran pastor. He was advised to hold off on talking with a recruiter until he learned where he would be called as a pastor, and that happened to be in North Dakota.

The only problem was that the North Dakota Army National Guard had no vacancies for chaplains at that time. But because he served three churches on the border with Minnesota — “On Sundays I would drive and preach and teach at each location,” Hedman said — he was urged to contact the Minnesota Army National Guard, which had an immediate opening for a chaplain in Moorhead, Minnesota, adjacent to Fargo, North Dakota.

“They sent a recruiter within the week,” Hedman recalled. “What I tell people is I did everything the wrong way — I got my education right away, and then I joined” in 1996.

He didn’t stay in the Minnesota Army National Guard, transferring to Wisconsin in 1999, in time to deploy to Iraq in 2003 with the Madison, Wisconsin-based 1st Battalion, 147th Aviation Regiment.

“We were there at the beginning of the war,” Hedman said. “That was quite the experience.”

Hedman also delivered the death notification to the family of Spc. Michelle Witmer, the first National Guard Soldier ever killed in action, in 2004. Witmer was also the first Wisconsin National Guard Soldier killed in action since World War II.

“Since then, I’ve made a lot,” he said — including, in some cases, the families of service members not in the Wisconsin National Guard. Those were difficult experiences, he said, but meeting those families later at the “Camp Serenity” event at Camp American Legion in Tomahawk, Wisconsin was very helpful, as it allowed for interaction beyond the shock of learning a family member had been killed overseas.

“To be honest, it was healing for me as well,” Hedman said.

Hedman said chaplains are frequently called upon when a service member is killed

or wounded, and help families process through grief and loss.

“We call ourselves a Guard family,” he said, “and we’re invited to every family because of the nature of our jobs.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the reliance on technology to minister to people.

“But one thing that hasn’t changed is the need to be in person with people,” Hedman said. “We don’t ever want to lose that — that’s one thing that shouldn’t change.”

The biggest challenge in Hedman’s career has not been helping troops or families deal with tragedy, but the administrative requirements of logging his hours as a federal technician, which is how he is paid as a full-time chaplain.

“[The two] don’t mesh well, because it’s not a 9-to-5 job,” Hedman said. “It’s not like I’m salaried and can cut loose and do my job.”

He said the most rewarding part of his role as a chaplain has been being able to help people.

“Years later I’ll see them and they’re doing great, but at one time they were going through hell,” Hedman said. “That’s rewarding.”

He sang the praises of the Strong Bonds program — a unit-based, chaplain-led program funded by the Defense Department that improves readiness for the Guard member and their family through education and training on relationships and communication skills.

“We do an average of eight a year,” Hedman said of the program for married service members as well as for those looking to begin a healthy relationship. “We’ve touched a lot of Soldiers, and relationships have improved.”

His advice to Lt. Col. Carl Livingston, and Lt. Col Jonathan Wymer, who will follow him as state chaplain and state support chaplain respectively, is simple.

“The chaplain corps has to be very pro-active,” Hedman said. “We’ve got to really be intentional about inserting ourselves, otherwise we can be left behind because people don’t know how to work with us. Sell commanders on our importance to their

command — seeing Soldiers on drill weekends, referring, mentoring, loving, forgiving.”

Hedman has served as a pastor for Lutheran churches during his time in the National Guard, and he will continue that at the conclusion of his military career.

“The church is such a central part of communities,” he said.

He said he will miss “the variety of people” he has met during his time as chaplain.

“I’ve really met some outstanding people around the world,” Hedman said, “just learning and listening to them.

“It’s been a privilege to serve,” he continued. “It’s been a rewarding journey. It’s been a good ride.”