

Lieutenant General N R M Borton DSO MBE speech—General Assembly 2022

Moderator,

It is a great and daunting honour to be invited to speak to you today. You will forgive me, therefore, if I start with a prayer of another old soldier, Sir Jacob Astley, before the battle of Edgehill. It goes: “Lord though knowest how busy I must be this day; if I should forget thee, I pray thee do not thou forget me”.

I speak to you as a soldier at a most grim and appalling time in international affairs. After generations, the shadow of major war has again fallen across Europe. Apart from the immense human tragedy it has brought, you will not be surprised to know that we in the NATO military chain are working hard to ensure that we are as prepared as possible for the worst, while doing our utmost to ensure it doesn't spread. We should not be complacent.

From a professional point of view, the war in Ukraine has given us another insight into the character and nature of war. Much is made of technology these days – of pilotless drones, of satellites and cyber warfare. However, what we have seen in Ukraine has underlined an inescapable military truth – that war is still fundamentally an activity of the human heart – and the human spirit. Indeed, it is the spirit of resistance and unity which has defined the extraordinary performance of the Ukrainian army and people. It is no surprise therefore that the Russian forces have deliberately targeted Ukrainian Churches and priests in their attempts to break the spirit of the Ukrainian people.

This is an important fact for us here today. It proves what we have long recognised in the British Army and our sister services, that over and above all the paraphernalia of war – the most important thing is the human spirit and morale of your soldiers. The great World War Two British Commander, Field Marshal Slim described it thus:

“Morale is a state of mind, an intangible force which moves a whole group of soldiers to give their last ounce to achieve something without counting the cost to themselves. The foundations are Spiritual, Intellectual and Physical – but Spiritual first; because only spiritual foundations can stand real strain.”

We are enormously fortunate in the Army, that amongst the things that we do really well, is our wonderful Royal Army Chaplains Department, who have a long and glorious history of providing pastoral care, spiritual support and moral guidance. And it is not an easy job in

this day and age – clearly I miss the old days when I first joined and the Jocks were marched to Kirk parade each Sunday and the Duty Officer read the lesson. Those compulsory days are gone now which is probably for the best (although they didn't seem to mind it and it certainly didn't do any harm!). I still believe that religion is enormously important to the soldier. Indeed, in a profession where one explicitly accepts the possibility or likelihood of one's own death; it's surprising that more soldiers would not subscribe to a faith which offered the possibility of everlasting life. The very special role of the military chaplain, or padre as we call them, as the focus for this, is beautifully illustrated in the painting by Matania of the Munster Fusiliers receiving last absolution on the eve of battle in 1915 in the Trenches. Padre Gleason sits astride his charger, ministering to his flock, a symbol of hope and courage.

Padre Gleeson was a great example of the many courageous and dedicated padres we have been blessed with during all our recent conflicts. One of the most famous was Padre Studdert Kennedy, known to the troops as 'Woodbine Willie' for the cigarettes he distributed. He wrote a very wonderful book which my own Divisional Chaplain gave me when I left the 3rd Division. Studdert Kennedy's book, *The Hardest Part*, makes the very clear link between soldiering in a rightful cause and the Christian faith; he exhorted his flock to pray, not for protection, but for courage to face the ultimate sacrifice when it came. In this way he saw themselves fighting the good fight in both senses simultaneously. Like the Christian spirit, good soldiers despise death and laugh at danger, if they be on the route where duty leads.

The padre's duties are more varied and often more unforeseen than any other soldiers. I had the privilege of commanding the Army's Parachute Brigade, descendants of the 1st Airborne Division which fought so valiantly against overwhelming odds at Arnhem. All its padres either parachuted or landed by glider into the battle. The following account describes the role played by one Padre Thorne during the battle:

"Chaplain Thorne was the man on the spot keeping everything running calmly and smoothly – his very presence creating an oasis of calm amid the tumult of war. Thorne, humbly and unfailingly, cared for them in the worst hours of their lives when they – most with appalling injuries – had greatest need of words of peace, calm and faith. He helped the doctor, assisted the orderlies, spoke with the wounded and bathed them as well; he dug the graves, provided proper funerals, and even – without a word – calmly cleaned the latrines when he thought necessary. Thorne was wholly prepared to give up his life for his fellow men."

I am glad to say that over my own long service, I have served with many padres of equal dedication and character as Chaplain Thorne, and who have made an immeasurable

contribution to our endeavours and the lives of my soldiers. I well recall in Afghanistan being particularly worried about one of my companies who were isolated and having a hard time. Instead of a Headquarters officer, I decided to send the padre down to look after them; and he rallied them wonderfully not only with spiritual and morale sustenance, but with real leadership too. Like ammunition, commanders on operations always need more padres.

I must say that as a SCOTS officer, I have mostly served with Church of Scotland chaplains, for happily the Army continues to try and always send them to Scottish battalions as a policy. The Royal Regiment of Scotland places huge value on this link – because the Jocks, as we have always called our soldiers, find it much easier to relate to Scottish ministers, and they just seem to fit in and become part of the family so quickly. The Church of Scotland, if I may say so, is ideally suited to the provision of chaplains; for you are very accessible, which is important for soldiers, and not overly wedded to traditionalism and doctrinalism; very important for an organisation based almost entirely on young people.

We have had some wonderful characters from the Church of Scotland over the years: one of whom taught me platoon tactics as an infantry officer before being ordained; he remained a friend and guide throughout my career, christened my daughter, and became the Chaplain General. Another served in the Spanish Foreign Legion before joining the Church; he was one of the toughest soldiers in the Battalion as padre, and the only one who was parachute trained! And the one the Jocks christened ‘The Laughing Padre’ such was the volume and heartiness of his constant laughter. The Jocks loved it, but we had to ban him from attendance on night patrols and ambushes!

I relate these tales to reinforce how important our Church of Scotland padres remain, whether it is serving with our Regular or Reserve battalions, or with our Cadets here in Scotland. Great challenges undoubtedly lie ahead for our forces; there will be tough times, and the history of the British Army has not, sadly, come to a sudden end in 2022. We have constant need of our Woodbine Willies and Padre Thornes every day, and we couldn't do it without them. I close with an appropriate line from the second book of Timothy which summarises their service: “Endure hardship with us, like a good soldier of Jesus Christ”.

Moderator