

Sacred to the Corps

by Leslie Dobbs-Allsopp

This past summer, Chaplain (Major General) David Hicks ('74B) was appointed chief of chaplains of the U.S. Army, capping a lifelong career in service to God and country. Hicks first enlisted as a private in 1958, served in Korea's DMZ (demilitarized zone), and discovered first-hand how vital and formative a chaplain's witness can be. As a young soldier serving at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, in 1964, Hicks was brought to faith, and eventually to ministry, through the spiritual leadership, guidance, and support of a Fort Campbell army chaplain. Upon his discharge, Hicks attended United Wesleyan College (Pennsylvania), graduating in 1971 en route to pursuing his own call to military chaplaincy. While at Wesleyan, he met and married his wife, Janice. The officiant for their wedding was Dr. Lloyd Ogilvie, who strongly encouraged the couple to come to PTS for seminary training.

Hicks remembers PTS with gratitude, citing the delights of a culture that included "quality education and quality students." Coming from a military background replete with experiences abroad, Hicks appreciated the breadth of colleges and countries represented in Princeton's student body. Even with the nation then embroiled in war in Vietnam, he says he did not experience much of the antimilitary sentiment of the times, though he recalls, "It would not have been popular to wear a uniform on campus." He remembers with fondness his field education, citing it along with Dr. Beeners's speech classes as especially important in training for his ministry. He speaks warmly of Dr. Story's classes, and shares the awe felt by any student who has ever sat in one of Dr. Metzger's exegesis classes.

Hicks's recent appointment makes him the third PTS grad to be named chief of chaplains since World War II. He was preceded by, among others, Chaplain (Major General) Kermit Johnson ('60B) and Gaylord T. Gunhus ('76M).

After his ordination by Lehigh Presbytery, Hicks returned to the army as a chaplain, serving in a number of postings both stateside and abroad. He maintains a "special place in his heart" for airborne battalions, as he trained over the years to reach the rank of master parachutist—the better to accompany his spiritual charges. His stint as command chaplain for special operations in Fort Bragg was both a notable career highlight and his favorite assignment. Tapped by his superiors to continue theological training, Hicks studied for a Th.M. in ethics with Stanley Hauerwas at Duke University Divinity School. He turned around and taught ethics himself, fulfilling an assignment to instruct senior enlisted and officer personnel at the U.S. Army Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia. There Hicks later served as the primary instructor for officer candidate training.

As army chief of chaplains, Hicks oversees the work of nearly 2,800 active duty and reserve chaplains, who represent a diversity of religious traditions and denominations. He advises the army chief of staff on all matters relating to the chaplaincy. The job means a lot of traveling, public speaking, and—not surprisingly—"lots of praying." All chaplains, Hicks included, are assigned to a position for a specific length of time; his service ends in the fall of 2007.

Though they frequently don military garb, army chaplains are noncombatants, and do not carry weapons. Each serves in a unit ministry team, which includes the chaplain and an assistant, who is an enlisted soldier. The chaplain assistant fulfills a variety of duties, from logistics, to pre-screening of counselees, to office operation—even to being the chaplain's bodyguard.

Major General Hicks makes visits to army chaplains all over the world, including the more than 450 who are currently serving in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"What I love so much is the opportunity to reach out and touch people performing ministry for our soldiers and families," Hicks says. He loves to visit chaplains, giving "on-the-spot support, to put my arms around them and make sure they know they are appreciated."

Hicks's priorities for his four-year term include working on a strategic plan for the future of the chaplaincy, as well as inculcating a culture of "a higher level of excellence" of religious support. He's convinced that bringing "spiritual leadership to a new level" will provide the army chaplaincy a legitimate opportunity "to influence army culture."

Not surprisingly, Hicks is passionate about the call of the military chaplain. Though a simple concept, the ministry of presence is an essential part of military life.

"I remember myself as a young soldier, and our chaplain who made himself available to young soldiers," he says. "We chaplains bring something unique; we bridge the gap between soldiers and God. We model for soldiers that there is a better way of life, and that God is always there for them." ■

