

Embattled Belief:
The Religious Experiences of American Military
Combatants during World War II and Today



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The second World War, more than any other, elicited a host of scholarly examinations of the behavior of soldiers in combat. In recent decades, both military historians and social scientists such as Samuel L. Stouffer, Drew Gilpin Faust, Gerald F. Linderman, and Peter Kindsvatter have studied various facets of battlefield behavior, including coping mechanisms, combat expectation, and motivation. They have helped civilians, soldiers, and other scholars better understand what war was like and how it affected those on the battlefields. Of the typical soldier's experience, historian John Keegan argues that the natural "emotion in battle is to be scared" because of the realities and dangers endemic to the war experience (qtd. in Kindsvatter vii). Yet, few scholars have investigated the various ways in which soldiers expressed and used their religious beliefs in war. This essay investigates the religious behavior and beliefs of American World War II servicemen and offers insights about how further study of faith during war can help current American troops in their transition from civilian to military life.

Historian Peter Kindsvatter suggests that two "distinctly contradictory attitudes towards personal faith are evident in the

memoirs.” According to him, soldiers either lose their faith or gain perspective on their spirituality (Kindsvatter 114). The records suggest, however, that personal faith within war was more complex than Kindsvatter notes. Some soldiers developed a strong religious piety; others remained indifferent or unchanged from their experiences, while another group lost their faith in both humanity and God.

Religion in the armed forces during World War II, much like in civilian milieus, came in a variety of forms. Many soldiers, for instance, prayed regularly and had a deep, though inward spirituality, but refused to attend their chaplain’s services. While some may not have had a healthy relationship with their particular chaplain, others might not have wanted to spend their limited spare time in holy services. Still others, like one soldier in Chaplain Arthur F. Glasser’s platoon, explained during the summer of 1943 that “while on the island during those awful naval shellings and bombings I used to pray like the rest. In my foxhole, I guess I made about a million promises and vows to God that if He would somehow get me out of the place alive I’d join a church and do anything He asked me to. But when we came to Australia,” the young soldier continued, “you know how we’ve been carrying on down here, I somehow forgot all my vows and promises. I can’t go to service now, I’d be such a hypocrite if I did.” (86). If this soldier did not attend services, it is significant that his reason for choosing not to do so was moralistic. His confession demonstrates the complexity of the role that religious beliefs played for soldiers during the second World War.

Like those in the civilian world, the American soldiers' spiritual beliefs ranged from theistic to atheistic, from those who proselytized to those who remained passive in their faith. Soldiers viewed, understood, accepted, and sometimes rejected God. Some felt reinvigorated after attending services or praying, while others did so because they wanted God "on their side" before an invasion or because the rest of their buddies were in the habit of regularly attending services. When removed from the rigors of combat, soldiers often expressed their most sincere and personal religious beliefs. Of course, many soldiers demonstrated remarkable faith during times of incredible stress. Despite witnessing horrific battlefield atrocities, most soldiers remained steadfast in their systems of belief. Some troops even made irrational decisions simply because they believed they had divine protection. They stood up while in their foxholes or darted across fields streaming with bullets, confident that God would remove them from harm's way. Even when captured and placed in POW camps, many soldiers firmly believed faith would allow them to escape. Other soldiers believed that each day they survived was a sign of God's grace, and each passing day reaffirmed and strengthened their religious convictions. All of these circumstances suggest the important role that religion has played in the experience of the American soldier. By examining these expressions, historians may develop a broad sense of how soldiers viewed and used that belief during war.

Most men who fought in the war were fairly traditional Christians from childhood, though they expressed their beliefs in a variety of ways. Captain Rowan Thomas, for example, described his cohort as

“deeply religious.” He had a spiritual “reawakening” when he visited what is believed to be the site of Jesus’ tomb while stationed in Jerusalem. His religiosity after that event made an impression on the men of the 513th, a bombardment squadron that shared tremendous unity. In fact, they began to attend church as a unified group. They routinely “took a ballot on Saturday night[s], ‘shall we go to church tomorrow?’” After the affirmative votes, the entire group attended services the following morning (Glasser 239). One scholar, Willard Sperry, argues this type of communal religiosity was not uncommon. He finds that “while it is true that the average soldier would not make the slightest effort to attend church individually and of his own accord, it is also true that if the rest of his company falls in for church, he will fall in, too” (48). The 513th’s major, Horace Wade, was largely responsible for their notable piety. Captain Thomas recalled Major Wade frequently “reading his black, gilt-edged Bible. He was a deeply religious boy. A true Christian gentleman, with firm faith in God, the Bible, and prayer, he put his religion into practice in every human relationship.” Thomas explained that “once or twice in one’s experience in the service one meets a man who has a quiet sincerity and simplicity of faith to which no words can do justice. Such men are rare—I myself have known only one—but such a faith, in its cheerfulness under all conditions and its breadth of understanding and humility, once recognized, can never be forgotten” (263). Although Major Wade fit this description, most soldiers practiced a more private spirituality.

One of the most private, but also devoutly religious soldiers in the American military, was also one of the most famous—General Matthew

B. Ridgway. George C. Mitchell, his biographer, claims that “Ridgway’s fearlessness in the front lines was founded on his solid religious base” because a “deep religious faith sustained him. He was not ostentatious or demonstrative about his faith, but it was real” (15). When one of Ridgway’s colonels complained that his exposure to the enemy drew unnecessary fire and endangered those compelled to emulate his “damn foolish” example, one of Ridgway’s staffers sincerely explained to him that “the general is very religious. He reads the Bible and prays. He firmly believes that God will not permit him to be hit before Germany is totally defeated” (Blair 21). In his own memoirs, Ridgway admits that “in the darkness, after you have gone to bed, when you are not the commander, with stars on your shoulders, but just one man, alone with your God in the dark, your thoughts inevitably turn inward, and out of whatever resources of the spirit you possess, you prepare yourself as best you may for whatever tests may lie ahead.” Ridgway expresses his piety in full when he admits that in times of unease, he always found

great comfort in the story of the anguish of Our Lord in the garden of Gethsemane. If He could face with calmness of soul the great suffering He knew was to be His fate, then I surely could endure any lesser ordeal of the flesh or spirit that might be awaiting me. From then on, there was no backward glancing to happy days gone by, no inner tremors brought on by peace, my heart was light, my spirits almost gay. (1-3)

John T. Bassett, an infantryman who fought in Italy in 1945, explained in his war journal that he “simply believed God would not separate him from his wife and children.” Although the war “could have destroyed him, he went through every day operating on faith” (49). This was not uncommon for soldiers either before, during, or after battle.

One private who served at Guadalcanal felt reinvigorated after praying, and was ready for whatever trauma ensued. He would “pray and talk with Jesus every night. It makes me feel safer,” he wrote (qtd. in Stavisky 72). This kind of religiosity shows up throughout World War II memoirs, diaries, and letters home. Soldiers prayed to God not only because many of them believed He would protect them, but because of the emotional and psychological benefits that they received from doing so. Religion, in short, helped many soldiers get through their war experience, and without that renewed sense of hope, many soldiers might not have had the psychological or emotional strength to get out of the war alive.

One of the most celebrated fighter pilots of the war, Colonel Robert Scott Jr. attests to the veracity of soldiers’ renewed faith. In addition to his own piety, he confesses in his memoir that he “believe[d] that when the war is over we will be closer to God...because I have seen the instances of real faith on several fronts in this war and have heard of them on all fronts” (Scott xiii). Marine Eugene B. Sledge had a religious renewal as well, afterward concluding that it was “impossible for Him to allow me to die.” Although no one else could attest to it, while sitting around a fire with some buddies, Sledge “heard a loud voice say clearly and distinctly,

‘You will survive the war!’” (50). Sledge previously considered himself a skeptic, but he “believed God spoke to me that night on that Peleliu battlefield, and resolved to make my life amount to something after the war” (91).

Conversely, some soldiers held strong convictions in their faith, but did not think God owed them any special treatment or protection. Although rifleman Leon Standifer was a man of faith, he understood that God would not protect him. Standifer confesses in his memoir, *Not in Vain*, that he “wasn’t looking for assurance that my life would be spared. People get killed in combat. I didn’t expect God to favor me above other Christians” (144). Red Bennett, a soldier who was frightened of the artillery fire on Iwo Jima, frequently “prayed to God for the courage to do his duty.” Afterward, Bennett reports that the Lord answered his prayers, which calmed any “fears he had about what lay ahead for him.” Bennett made peace with God, commenting that “whatever happened was God’s will,” and he would accept His plan, whatever it might entail (qtd. in Shively 115). Paratrooper George William Sefton explains in his account of the war that he, too, believed that “there is just one effective shield against the mental and emotional stresses of combat. It is the firm conviction that there is a Supreme Being who decided the extent of your survival. So you do your job to the best of your ability and let Him call the shots” (216). This spiritual mindset is reflected and summarized in an elegy written by an anonymous World War II soldier:

No shell or bomb can on me burst,
Except my God permit it first.

Then let my heart be kept in peace;
His watchful care will never cease.

No bomb above, nor mine below
Need cause my heart one pang of woe
The lord of Hosts encircles me:
He is the Lord of earth and sea. (Glasser 109)

The American World War II soldier's most common type of spirituality was of the inward, circumstantial sort. As historian Daniel Jorgensen argues, "The crisis of war made many a man turn to his fundamental faith in God in which he found strength and vision for the demands he faced" (276). But for some theologians like Talbot and analysts like Sperry, this faith was not faith, because religion is not something that blows with the wind. They argue that if one evokes the help of God only when it is useful, one was essentially irreligious. Talbot asserts that the faith of the American soldier was "an inarticulate faith expressed through deeds," rather than traditional religious practices such as praying every night or attending services every Sunday (8). He insists that this form of faith was "not the Christian religion" and equates it with a type of superstition which had "little to do with" true faith (Talbot 13).

Praying while in danger, however, is not necessarily fraudulent or dishonest. For religious soldiers, it seemed natural, and quite often, was genuine. After enduring heavy shelling, many soldiers asked God for protection. In return, they promised to donate to charity, attend church every Sunday, or live a more religious life. If they knew their prayers were insincere when spoken or thought, could they not

assume that God knew as well? Soldiers often intended to fulfill their promises to God if He spared their life. Even if they later reneged on those promises, they, for the moment, forced themselves into believing that there was someone listening to them and that if they prayed hard enough, they would be saved.

Historian Irwin Beiler disagrees with this contention by arguing that “prayer in crisis, in predicament, in the face of possible death, unless that is but an item in a way of life, is not religion” (145). He dismisses, or perhaps overlooks soldiers’ spiritual fluidity during an uncertain moment in their lives. Beiler underestimates the ability of an individual—whether civilian or military—to genuinely mean something one moment and change one’s mind the next. His critique is especially surprising considering the tradition World War II soldiers were working within—Christianity. Perhaps Christianity’s most basic teaching is that humans are naturally prone to sin and will often deceive, lie, steal, or cheat when self-interested pursuits conflict with their religious ideals. The act of praying for safety while promising to devote oneself to God fits that description quite well.

To dismiss that behavior as “irreligious” is to dismiss the fallibility of Christian soldiers. Perhaps more importantly, because of the nature of war—bombs, bullets, death, and decay—soldiers faced physical, emotional, and spiritual tests such as never before. Therefore, it might be too much to ask soldiers to have had unwavering faith in their religion amid the chaos of battle. Regardless of the extent of one’s religious commitment, moments of doubt, anger, inconsistency, and even resentment toward God seem like a natural response to the unique challenges that war presents.

Belier is not entirely wrong to be skeptical of this type of prayer, however, because World War II soldiers routinely used religion as a coping mechanism in times of stress. According to Stouffer, “The data establish a definite relationship between stress and reliance on prayer.” As illustrated in church attendance records—which demonstrate a significant increase just prior to action—soldiers usually neglected religious practice, but frequently called upon their God in times of need (Stouffer 187). But it is difficult to measure religious faith by statistics, surveys, or observation because of the inward nature of belief and because of how differently certain soldiers expressed that belief. Nevertheless, it is apparent that religion has played an important role in helping calm, sustain, and motivate soldiers during combat.

Even though religion has had a positive effect on most soldiers, historian Richard Holmes has discussed those who had their faith “shattered by their experiences and who emerge from the crucible cynical and atheistic.” A small, but significant proportion of the men’s journals surveyed for this study fit into Holmes’ paradigm (qtd. in Glasser 86, 151). As reported rates of secularism have climbed in America since World War II, it is important to examine non-religious soldiers’ experiences in order to better understand the contemporary challenges that face a military designed to meet national security issues in the twenty-first century. Records from the Great Lakes Naval Center found that in 1944, 74.7 percent of the men in battle were Protestant, 23 percent Catholic, and 1.7 percent Jewish. But “professing atheists were quite rare—perhaps not one in a thousand” (Sperry 45). Samuel Stavisky reinforces this point when he recalls in

his memoirs that “in my war experience I came across few, very few convinced atheists. Almost every Yank had some religious background, and no matter how lax or tenuous his faith might have become, in the pinch he turned to his God and prayed, if only a few words of ‘save me’ or of gratitude” (225). Though rare, there were men who never relied on prayer, even during their most traumatic field experiences. Some even lost their faith precisely because of the horrors of wartime experience.

Historian John Ellis has argued that for some soldiers, “Nothing so utterly and completely dissipated their residual religious beliefs as the randomness and pervasiveness of violent death” (105). Master Sergeant Kathleen Johnson, founder of the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers, recently supported Ellis’ contention. She claims many “people have served without having to call on a higher power,” and to ignore this “fact,” she protested, is “a denial of our contributions” (qtd. in Phillips 1-2). But atheist contributions are much more difficult to measure when examining the Second World War for the obvious reason that so few atheists served in the military.

Some men, however, began to abandon their religious beliefs as a consequence of their war experience. John Bassett began to lose his faith when he realized Easter was near, a holiday that had formerly reaffirmed his convictions. At first unsure if Easter had passed, Bassett second-guessed himself before asking, “Or has it passed? Oh well, what the hell difference did it make anyway? So Jesus Christ was resurrected from his tomb...I had heard the story from the time of my childhood.” Bassett’s contempt for his religion grew when he thought of his religious education as a child. He continued to emote:

So anyway, God, I know you are up there and I know you see me and that you hear me, and I know you believe me: but I do not believe you really care about us. There have always been wars, and the Bible says there will always be wars. So, God, I ask you: do I really need to be forgiven? I drifted to sleep and wondered why God had not made me in the likeness of a skylark. (Bassett 98-99)

Easter Mass had similar effects on Lieutenant Morton Eustis, who felt it was such a disappointment that he left the service early. He explained to his mother in a series of letters that the church service was a “one-size-fits-all type of mass,” but his reason for leaving went deeper than he initially suggested (100). The Memorial Day service eight weeks later epitomized his mounting dissatisfaction with the church. He recollected the service with acerbic sarcasm, viewing it as nothing more than “a few hundred soldiers sitting, singing hymns in a wheat field in Africa during a lull in a training program—saying the Lord’s Prayer as a prelude to God knows what” (99). Another Christian holiday further spurred his increasing disdain for the church. He decided not to attend Christmas Mass in 1943, as he did in 1942, because it “had no great appeal to” him anymore. The war slowly eroded his religious faith until he could no longer attend services (Eustis 114). Some soldiers, though, were non-religious even in times of peril.

Henry Giles was not necessarily an atheist, but certainly never entertained the idea of attending services. He confesses in his war journal that he did not “believe in a personal God as taught” and

professed that he “always wanted to, but never had a prayer answered” (Giles 24). For that reason, he stopped praying during the war. But even those who were sincerely religious battled with bouts of disbelief. Before his conversion experience, Marine E.B. Sledge recalls watching a chaplain administer to the spiritual needs of some men during a sermon in the South Pacific. The soldier across from him watched “with an expression of skepticism that seemed to ask, ‘What’s the use of all that? Is it gonna keep them guys from getting hit?’” Sledge concludes that “he, like all of us, couldn’t help but have doubts about his God in the presence of constant shock and suffering” (Sledge 242). Leon Weckstein, infantryman in the Italian campaign, began to have doubts about his religion as well, but not until V-J Day. In his war memoir, *Through My Eyes*, he writes that the initial surrender made him feel “like saying a prayer of thanks to the God who had brought me this far, until I thought of the thousands who hadn’t made it. A few atoms of agnosticism were growing into my brain that day” (Weckstein 180). As a member of the First Marine Division that fought at Guadalcanal, George Hunt underwent a spiritual crisis during his tour of duty as well. He saw “men who were continually smiling and happy and never had a morose moment, who defied death, who prayed to God for protection from it, or who naively believed that it could not touch them, suddenly blown to bits by a mortar shell or riddled by machine-gun bullets” (Hunt 12). These examples demonstrate a muted, but present spiritual doubt among soldiers of varying degrees of religiosity during the war. Though no soldier wrote memoirs or kept a diary on record that presents a distinctly atheistic view of the war, these kinds of indirect references

can conclude that despite popular conceptions, then, as now, there were atheists in foxholes.

During the second World War, professed atheism in the mess hall, let alone the trenches, however, was rare. This tendency followed larger trends in American culture, where public and private officials regularly spoke of the need, as President Franklin D. Roosevelt repeatedly announced, to preserve and defend “Christian civilization” (1). But in the twenty-first century, secularism, if not unbelief, has become a more visible part of American society. Just as it did in the 1940s, the military reflects the American culture of which it is a part. Rather than push America’s bravest men and women into unbelief, war seems to reconfirm the beliefs that soldiers bring with them onto the battlefield—whether they be theistic, agnostic, or atheistic. In this way, the experiences of soldiers during the second World War are quite different from those of today because in the twenty-first century a much more heterogeneous and complex matrix of religious belief has cemented itself into the armed forces. In brief, there is much more room for agnosticism, skepticism, and unbelief in the ranks today than there was half a century ago.

Army Specialist Joe Schaffel, then 24, who grew up in a Catholic family in Illinois, recently reports in one study that he “had faith until I got to Iraq. I haven't gotten it back since. Once you get there, you wonder how God could allow anyone to go through that” (qtd. in Conant 11). Peter Moeller, raised in the Lutheran tradition from childhood, similarly let go of his faith while serving in Iowa’s 109th Medical Battalion: “I began to think a little too deep, and it ruined that whole belief for me,” he began. Although he did not dismiss “the

possibility [that] there may be a God,” Moeller continues, “the whole organized religion thing went out the window really fast” (qtd. in Rossiter 1). Even chaplains like Roger Benimoff, whose chief task is to attend to the spiritual needs of the men and women in the military, have expressed misgivings about their faith. Benimoff recently admitted that he did not “have a desire to totally give myself to God. However, I am praying that God changes my desire” (Benimoff and Conant 284-85). Others, like Chaplain Major John Morris, have explained the decline of faith in the military. Of his experiences in Iraq, he reports that “a third of the soldiers were men and women of faith, growing in their faith or coming to a new understanding of their faith; a third of the soldiers were indifferent or fatalistic...the other third were either indifferent or jettisoning their faith” (qtd. in Stephens 1). While there have always been unbelievers in the military, there is no question that their number and visibility have escalated since World War II.

Despite significant advances in military technology, strategy, war tactics, and professions of faith, American soldiers today nevertheless experience many of the same questions regarding their faith as they did seventy years ago. Death still looms from above and below, friends still perish without a moment’s warning, and soldiers still know that any hesitation on the battlefield might be their last. Spotting the changes in the religious realm, however, scholars have begun to pay more attention to the intersections of faith and war than they did in the 1940s. In addition to the rise of unbelief, recent analyses of the role of religion in war has shown that, just as it did during World War Two, faith before and during combat often intensifies. Army Specialist

Brent Hendrix, who lost his right leg during battle, found greater strength from his service. “I’m good with God,” he reports. “I talked to God a lot more while I was over there—I told him, ‘You can take me any day, I’m still with you’” (Benimoff and Conant 249). Pete Martin, who served in the 425th Transportation Company in Sioux City, saw an evolution in his faith in the months leading up to his service which, he contends, only increased as a consequence of his experience in Iraq. “My faith gave me a lot of strength,” Martin explained. “I felt stronger knowing that God was with us, that he was keeping us from losing any of our unit” (qtd. in Rossiter 1).

The historical and contemporary examples here suggest that there is a wide spectrum of religious experience for men and women who go to war. Though most soldiers do not lose their faith during battle, spiritual distress has not been uncommon for many soldiers who have served their country. The realities and horrors of war sometimes turn soldiers away from their faith while for others, it reinforces their religiosity. No matter the outcome, the role that religion plays is an important part of the war experience for soldiers of all religious persuasions.

By paying closer attention to the relationship between religiosity and war, policy-makers, friends, and families of our bravest men and women can better prepare our troops for the realities of battle before deployment and help them transition to civilian life once they return home. As Chaplain Benimoff writes, “War zones have a way of traveling home with you.” For Benimoff and others, their crises of faith occurred not during the heat of battle, but once they returned home. Benimoff explains that during the conflagration of war, there

“was no time to think and too much adrenaline” to seriously test his faith. Instead, his “problem happened after I got home, in this warm house here on this cul-de-sac, surrounded by my wife and my boys, and the ever-present sound, not of guns, but of the neighborhood kids playing outside” (Benimoff and Conant 248-49). It was only then that the chaplain had the opportunity to reflect on his war experiences. If we are going to respond to the needs of our veterans, we need to be aware of the challenges that they face in their transition back to civilian life. Recent studies of World War II soldiers suggest that religion not only plays an important role in helping soldiers during battle but long after the din of war has commenced. This makes the historical study of our soldiers more than an intellectual exercise. A more complete understanding of the relationship between religion and war might have lasting influence on our soldiers’ social, mental, and spiritual well-being.

Although there are significant differences between the World War Two and twenty-first century generations, further study into the former can suggest ways we may support the latter. If the results of a forthcoming study in the *Journal of Religion and Health* are right, religion has served as a useful tool in helping soldiers transition back to civilian life. The study, conducted by a pair of scholars at Cornell University and Virginia Wesleyan College, assesses the long-term effects of war on religiosity. The scholars conclude that soldiers found comfort in religious faith during the most intense combat experience. Just as important, the study claims that veterans who bravely faced the most dangerous battlefield circumstances have remained disproportionately committed to their faith almost seventy years after

their last military engagement. Correspondingly, those who faced relatively mild combat experience tended to distance themselves from their faith. Those soldiers who reported the most intense combat experience, for example, were twice as likely to pray during battle. More important for this essay, those embattled soldiers have continued to attend church services and have remained active members within their faith communities—and at disproportionate rates.

While many of our financial, moral, and political resources rightly go toward helping soldiers transition back to civilian life, study of World War Two soldiers suggests that religion might be one of the most useful tools in not only helping soldiers on the battlefields of war, but also in responding to the obstacles that they face years, or even decades, after they return home. Moreover, it seems to play an especially significant role for our troops who faced the most daunting challenges. As the Cornell study concludes, “the more that the veterans reported they disliked the war, the more religious they were 50 years after combat” (Kelly 1). Based on longitudinal evidence from the Greatest Generation, families, friends, policy-makers, chaplains, and leaders of faith communities ought to consider adding religion to the list of ways to help prepare young men and women for battle, sustain them during the height of combat, and transition them back into civilian life.

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