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Chaplain Wants Shipmates 'To See God In Me'

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NORFOLK, Va. - Southern Baptist chaplain Fred Holcombe Jr. pastors a flock numbering 3,500-5,800 people -- the population of a small town. But this "town" is more than 18 stories high, 1,123 feet long, 200 feet wide and takes up 4 1/2 acres. When fully loaded, this town weighs in at 95,000 tons -- yet it floats.

It is the USS Enterprise, the "Big E" -- the world's first nuclear-powered aircraft carrier and, when launched in 1962, the longest naval vessel in the world. Its home port is Norfolk, Va., where the Big E has left for one of her final six-month deployments before she is scheduled to be decommissioned -- after 51 years of service -- in 2013.

But until then, Lt. Cmdr. Holcombe, 47, has a full-time job to do. Fortunately, he's not the only chaplain on the Big E. There are three others -- the command chaplain who is Presbyterian, a Catholic priest and another Southern Baptist chaplain.

"The old saying on a ship is that every day is Monday except Sunday," Holcombe said. "On Sundays, we obviously have church. In fact, we have many, many different services go on each Sunday." As a chaplain, Holcombe said he not only prepares weekly sermons but his mission is to share the Gospel and take care of his floating flock, most of whom average 18-25 years of age.

Holcombe assists Enterprise crew members with any kind of issue they might have -- from a sailor who's run afoul of his chain of command, to helping someone salvage or maintain a marriage, to even talking some sailors out of committing suicide. He also spends time just visiting the aircraft carrier's living and work areas -- every nook and cranny -- of the Big E, no small feat when you consider it spans the length of five football fields.

"With all the spaces we have on board the ship, there's always somebody to go visit," Holcombe said, "and they all want a visit from the chaplain, even the folks in the [nuclear] reactors and other places you may not think a chaplain would typically go. But we're always welcomed and well-received because they're happy somebody's coming in to see them."

For six months, it's a ministry that spans 24 hours a day, seven days a week ministry. There's no wife, kids or house to go home to each night, just the claustrophobic close quarters of a tiny stateroom Holcombe shares with another officer -- a complete stranger at the beginning of the six-month voyage but certainly not at its end.

"You have to have a very forgiving spirit of the people around you," Holcombe said. "You tolerate what they do and they tolerate what you do. There's a camaraderie that is built and tested in a refining fire. It's amazing to watch the interpersonal relationships that go on and how an individual begins to grow close and the word 'shipmates' becomes a term of endearment, not a derogatory one.

"As a chaplain, there are times you feel like you can never be off, you always have to be on. Yet [crew members] see who you are, and I can tell you I want them to see God in me. I want them to see a person who is genuine ... even with all my bumps, bruises, warts and scars."

What earns military chaplains the right to be heard, Holcombe said, is the very fact that they are present and accounted for among their soldiers, airmen or sailors -- as in the case of the USS Enterprise.

"The saying is true that people don't care what you have to say or what you know until they know how much you care," Holcombe said. "The ship's crew knows I'm there enduring the same things they are -- the separation from their families, the hardships and the long hours. They work 24-36 hours straight sometimes because that's what it takes to get the job done.

"The American people would be absolutely amazed and astonished and proud of these kids -- their sons and daughters -- serving on the Enterprise."

"Orchestrated chaos" is how Holcombe describes activity on the Enterprise's flight deck, day or night. Imagine flying in to land on the Big E's deck on a moonless night when the only light for 100 miles is the carrier's landing lights. To a pilot, the landing deck may look like a floating postage stamp as the aircraft carrier -- although mammoth -- pitches to and fro at the mercy of a much larger ocean.

"You have so many people moving around doing so many different things, if you go up on the flight deck you'd better keep your head on a swivel," Holcombe said. "You're constantly looking around -- over your shoulder, behind you, in front of you."

The Navy chaplain believes the real unsung heroes of the Navy are the military spouses -- both men and women -- who keep the home fires burning.

"When you think about leaving your home for six months and you're married, there are things that happen," Holcombe said. "You leave one person and when you go back home, something mysterious has happened. You've changed and so has your spouse. So you begin to have these anxieties of the reunion because you wonder how she has changed, what's she done and how you have changed in ways you may not even recognize.

"The amazing thing about my wife Wendy is that she is just as sold out to do this for God as I am," Holcombe said. "I think that is such a quality in her life that God is able to give her the strength and dependence on Him to endure the separations and the hardships we have."

Back home in Norfolk, they have two sons -- Brent, 20, and William, 9 -- who also endure the long months without their dad's presence. Fred and Wendy celebrated 16 years of marriage in May when he was deployed somewhere on the other side of the world serving his country, but most important, serving God.

Mickey Noah writes for the North American Mission Board. NAMB serves as the endorsing entity for more than 1,350 military chaplains serving throughout the world. In addition, NAMB commissions more than 5,000 missionaries throughout North America. To view a video about Chaplain Holcombe, visit www.namb.net/Big_E.

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