

Chaplains prep West Point cadets for spiritual warfare

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By Gregory Tomlin

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EST POINT, N.Y. (BP)—Southern Baptist chaplains Col. John Cook and Lt. Col. Darrell Thomsen, along with other chaplains at West Point, mourn the loss of 51 academy graduates since the war began.

Still, new cadets keep coming with a desire to serve. Among the cadets are Cook's twin sons, both "plebes"—first-year students. Despite the risks involved with service, Cook said he is proud his sons, Jonathan and Joshua, have chosen to attend West Point.

U.S. Army Chaplain
Col. John Cook, a
graduate of Southern
Baptist Theological
Seminary, points to the
grave site of 2nd Lt.
Emily Perez, the first
female West Point
graduate to be killed in
Iraq. Cook is the U.S.
Military Academy
chaplain and senior
adviser to the
superintendent on
religious affairs. (BP
Photo)

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“This is the only place they applied,” he said. “It was the only place they wanted to be.”

Each West Point cadet is mindful of the burdens of duty to their nation in wartime, and they are aware the path of service they’ve chosen may even cost them their lives, the Baptist chaplains noted.

“The cadets here know that,” said Cook, the academy’s senior chaplain and adviser to the superintendent on religious affairs. “In fact, all of our cadets who are currently students here made the decision to come to West Point after Sept. 11, 2001. So, they knew when they came here that there is a significant possibility that they will be going into combat.”

“We help them work through the fear that goes along with combat,” said Thomsen, the academy’s Protestant cadet chaplain. “There is a lot of power in fear, but there’s more power in faith.”

Chaplains at West Point are involved in a “ministry of preparation,” Cook said.

The chaplains work with students who have questions about war, killing and about what will happen to them if they die in combat. They attempt to resolve these issues within the cadets’ first two years at the academy, before they must commit to a term of service as an officer in the Army and face possible deployments overseas.

“They know they need to be prepared,” Cook said. “We don’t want them blindly graduating from here. We have a responsibility to see that they work through this whether they ask about it or not. If they don’t ask, we put it on the table for them. They’ve got to resolve it.”

It helps the cadets at West Point to know the chaplains themselves have dealt with many of the same issues they will face. Both Cook and Thomsen served in combat, Thomsen in Panama with the 82nd Airborne Division in

1989 and both men in Desert Storm in 1991.

Cook was a battalion chaplain with the 18th Airborne Corps and lost one soldier during the 100-hour ground war in 1991. He saw rocket launchers and helicopters engage Iraqi troops and tanks in his area. Thomsen also lost some of his troops in a minefield.

From 2004 to 2005, just prior to his most recent duty station at West Point, Cook also was chaplain to the Coalition Land Forces Component in Kuwait. Being with the soldiers in the theater of combat operations is what he and other chaplains call the “ministry of presence,” an indispensable service to troops under fire.

“We weren’t there with weapons. We weren’t there to take lives. We were there to care for our soldiers on the battlefield,” Cook said.

Caring for soldiers meant treating them after they had been wounded, writing a letter to family members for them, and even relaying messages to wounded comrades.

It meant sharing the gospel when the opportunity presented itself. Cook led 27 soldiers to Christ during Operation Desert Storm and baptized 15.

When a death occurs, notifying families of the loss of their loved becomes the focus of ministry. The death notification is the most unpleasant of the chaplains’ duties, they said. Both have been called on to be bearers of the grim news when soldiers from the area surrounding West Point have been killed in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Thomsen said the visits never are easy because every family is unsuspecting.

“I’d rather go to combat than I would make a death notification,” he said.

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