

‘Peace came over me’ on Korean hillside, chaplain recalled

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NORTH FORK, Va. (BP)—Chaplain Parker Thompson can recall the moment more than 60 years ago when he knew he was where God wanted him—as an Army chaplain in the Korean War.



Parker Thompson

With the war’s end in sight in the summer of 1953, fighting grew furious as the two sides hammered out an agreement over the transfer of prisoners of war.

On the backside of a blood-soaked hill near some of the deadliest fighting of the war, Thompson waited for 10 to 20 troops—whoever could make it—to join him for an impromptu worship service. In those moments, with life and death “tenuous,” he later said, the young Army chaplain stopped to ponder

his calling.

"A peace came over me," said Thompson, a Southern Baptist chaplain who was then 27. "This is my place. I wouldn't trade this hillside for any church or pulpit in America. That never left me."

Two years after graduation from [Southern Baptist Theological Seminary](#) in Louisville, Ky., Thompson was just beginning a distinguished chaplaincy career that would span nearly three decades marked by two major wars. He is one of about 120 Southern Baptist chaplains who served during the Korean War.

'One of our nation's heroes'

"Chaplain Parker Thompson is truly one of our nation's heroes, one of our last remaining military chaplains who brought the presence of the Lord to our troops on the blood-soaked battlefields of the Korean War," said Doug Carver, executive director of the [North American Mission Board's](#) chaplaincy team and a former U.S. Army two-star general.

Born into a family with a long history of military service, Thompson wanted to be a soldier as long as he can remember. With no religious background in his family, Thompson first heard the gospel from evangelist Charles Fuller on the "Old Fashioned Revival Hour" radio broadcast in 1943.

"I was surfing the radio and picked up the music and liked it, and then the next week, and the next week," Thompson said. "After a while I thought, 'Why don't I listen to what he is saying?' So I listened, and he talked about the need to be saved. I had never heard anything like that. I gave my life to Christ through that ministry."

As Thompson began to read his Bible and become involved in Calvary Baptist Church in St. Louis, he sensed a growing call to ministry. One day, standing on the corner of Penrose Street and Gano Avenue in St. Louis,

Thompson realized God wanted to use that calling in the military.

Call to chaplaincy ministry

"It just came over me: Do you want to spend your life as an Army officer, or do you want to share what God has given you?" Thompson recounted. "I didn't know any professed Christians in those days."

War broke out in Korea two years into his seminary preparation when 75,000 North Korean troops stormed across the 38th parallel that separated the Soviet-backed People's Republic of Korea and the pro-western Republic of Korea. That June 1950 action launched not only war in Korea, but also a four-decade Cold War pitting America and its allies against the Soviet Union-led communist world.

Just four days after his May 1951 seminary graduation, Thompson began his paperwork for entrance into the Chaplain Corps. After a short stint in the reserves, he started serving on active duty as an endorsed chaplain of the Southern Baptist Convention. He arrived in Korea in November 1952.



U.S. Army squad targets the enemy during the Korean War. (Image: Wikipedia) Besides the obvious dangers and encumbrances of war—he was wounded five times during

combat—ministry during most of the Korean War wasn't much different than a civilian pastorate, Thompson said. He spent time planning worship services, counseling soldiers and getting to know the troops.

"Most of my sermons were evangelistic in nature," Thompson said. "The soldiers were facing life-and-death situations."

Ministry changed significantly as the war neared its end and fighting intensified, Thompson said. When he first arrived in Korea, the combatants were in the midst of a prolonged stalemate with an emphasis on trench warfare. As the United Nations and their communist opponents negotiated exchanges of prisoners of war, fighting picked up.

"I think it's safe to say that morale picked up at that point," Thompson said. "You felt like you were doing something again. Of course, casualties were much higher, but you didn't feel like you were just sitting there."

Heavier fighting didn't just mean more dangers for the troops Thompson served. Because chaplains were expected to minister on the front lines of the war, they faced many of the same challenges fellow soldiers faced, but without the aid of firearms. According to the Geneva Conventions, the international law governing warfare, chaplains were declared noncombatants and, as such, couldn't officially carry weapons.

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Often, the pastoral temperament and role of chaplains led them into harm's way to care for the men they served. Thompson remembers volunteering to help two other men carry five soldiers—one dead, another badly hurt and three unconscious—out of a completely dark minefield.

"It was very dangerous and a very scary thing to do, obviously," Thompson

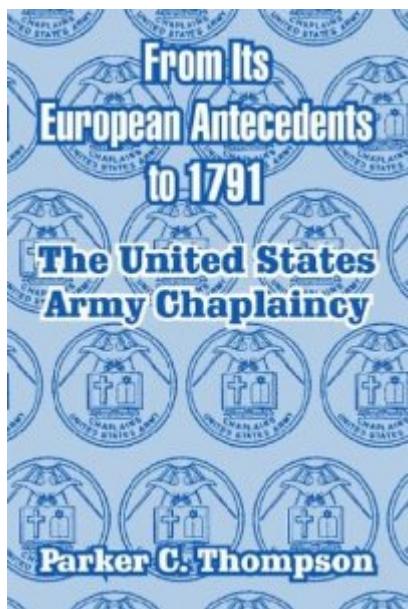
said. "But it had to be done. It was just understood that the chaplain would go with them."

In the six decades since the end of the Korean War, it often has gotten lost between World War II and Vietnam, but Thompson believes veterans of Korea have much to be proud of.

"I'd like people to remember that this is when communists were trying to push and get Korea, which is like a dagger pointing at Japan," Thompson said. "We began stopping the military aggression of international communism. It's something that any Korean veteran can be proud of. We put in a stop and said, 'This won't be tolerated.' And the chaplains were right there with the soldiers as they did it."

Vietnam War

During the Vietnam War, Thompson served as a chaplain for two divisions, placing him on the ground in Vietnam from August 1967 to August 1968. Before retiring in 1980, he served in a variety of chaplaincy roles, including the staff and faculty at the U.S. Army Chaplain School in Hamilton, N.Y.



Passionate about the Chaplaincy Corps, Thompson led the effort to put together a five-volume history on chaplaincy in the U.S. military. Thompson wrote the initial volume, *[From Its European Antecedents to 1791: The United States Army Chaplaincy](#)*.

Thompson earned numerous awards during his three decades of military service, including a Legion of Merit award, the Bronze Star Medal and a Purple Heart, among others. He was knighted by the order of St. John of Jerusalem, a European honor that dates back to the Middle Ages.

For the 31 years since his military retirement, Thompson has served as a Southern Baptist pastor, the past 20 years at [North Fork Baptist Church in North Fork, Va.](#)

“I can honestly say without reservation, if I knew then what I know now, I’d do it all over again,” Thompson said. “It was the greatest experience not only being a chaplain to our young men and women, but then to come back enriched from that experience and being able to serve as a pastor for 31 years in two different Baptist churches.”